SUSPECT

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FAIRLIE

DETECTIVE
STORY CLUB
INC.

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The initiation fee was a murdered body . . . and a dog's howl the signal of death . . . .

PUBLISHED BY

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

FOR

DETECTIVE STORY CLUB, INC.

PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press*, GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

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SUSPECT

CHAPTER I

JAMES BROWN, alias John Smith, and sometimes Thomas Martin, looked at the angry red scar on his neighbour's temple with a mixture of fear and admiration.

"That was a near one, Bert. Who did it?"

The effect of his words was instantaneous and unexpected.

"Who the hell d'you think?"

The man, Bert, who had answered so sharply and with such irritation, suddenly ceased frowning and laughed, which in his case was merely a movement of the lips, and although it passed for mirth the effect was to lend him an expression of the utmost ferocity.

"*He* did it, of course, when he got into one of his blooming tempers."

Brown leaned forward.

"Who is *he?*" he asked.

For a long minute there was silence. The two men sitting in the farmhouse parlour stared at each other without speaking, then very slowly Bert made answer.

"I don't know," he said. "Nobody knows, but it doesn't matter. He pays us his money if and when we deliver the goods. That's all that matters to us. His money is good and it's in cash. No fear of it be-

ing traced." He paused for a moment. Then: "He may be a hard master, James Brown, but in some ways he is a good one and so long as there's no attempt at double-crossing, no attempt to do him down, he'll treat you square."

The other sat upright suddenly.

"I don't like it," he said. "I wish I hadn't come."

A gleam came into his companion's eyes as he leant forward.

"And if you hadn't what would have happened?" he said. "What would you have done with . . ."

He was not allowed to finish the sentence, for Brown threw out his hand with a protesting gesture.

"For God's sake don't speak of it!"

His voice was low but there was a wealth of passion in it which gave it a curiously ringing tone. The other sat upright again.

"Well," he said, "what did you do it for anyway? You did it for *him,* didn't you?"

"Yes—I did."

"*He'll* pay you well; isn't that all you were after?"

"Oh, I suppose so, but I tell you I wish to God I hadn't done it now. There was something in that girl's face just before . . . just before . . ."

The other gave vent once more to his caricature of a laugh.

"You're getting nervy, Jim, that's what's the matter with you. Fancy James Brown getting nervy! What are you afraid of? Didn't I tell you that *he* never lets you down?"

"I know, but . . ."

"Sh. . . . Here he comes!"

Both men stood up as the door opened. A tall

figure entered the room, moved quickly to the table and sat down. All his movements were jerky, yet he gave the appearance of being amazingly vital. His eyes were deep sunk in a very sallow face, his hair jet black, one hand, his right, remained in his coat pocket, the other he placed on the table, fingers outstretched, motionless.

"Well?"

The single word seemed to come through his teeth like a hiss. Both the men standing opposite jumped involuntarily.

"This is the man, Brown, sir," suddenly said Bert. "The man you wanted to see."

The strange, sinister figure sitting at the table moved his head very slightly so that Brown came into the full vision of the fierce, grey eyes. For a long moment the former remained inert, staring at Brown, evidently summing him up and coming to a decision. During this time both men on the opposite side of the table fidgeted awkwardly, and longed for their host to make some movement or say some word which would break the tension. At last it came.

"Are you ready to enter my service?"

There came no answer. Bert nudged his companion and whispered to him: "Speak up, man."

"Yes, sir," said Brown, quickly.

"And you realise all that it entails?"

Once again Brown remained silent, once again he was brought to action by his quicker-witted friend.

"Yes, sir."

"An absolute obedience to my commands. Complete faith in me, which of course this obedience must entail."

"Yes, sir, I understand."

"You will be paid well. Has your friend told you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. On those conditions I am prepared to engage you, providing of course that you have brought your entrance fee to my little gang."

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, the man sitting at the table laughed. It was a curious sound, very low, rather like a hiss again. It gave the impression of coming between closed teeth and there was little resemblance to mirth. It was, however, very soft and not altogether unpleasant. The effect on his two listeners was immediate and rather surprising. Bert, who evidently was already a member of this man's band, flushed slightly, but Brown lost what little colour he normally possessed in his evil face. Opening his mouth he tried to speak, but no sound came from his throat. He remained quite still, but a close observer might have noticed that beads of sweat had gathered on his forehead.

"This little formality, no doubt, you were made aware of?"

"I—I was, sir."

"Very well. You have accomplished it?"

"I have, sir."

"Splendid. Er—have you brought the poor lady with you?"

"Yes, sir. In a box in the hall."

"Better and better. Just verify that fact, Bert, will you, please?"

The man at the table leant back, placing the tips of his fingers together. He was smiling slightly, but

this did little to relieve the cold cruelty of his face. The messenger left the room and during all the time that he was absent neither of the two men in the room spoke one word. In a short time Bert returned and reported that he had verified the information given.

"Delightful! The lady's name, please."

"May Perkins."

"Of?"

"Aldershot, sir."

"How was she killed?"

"I—I stuck her, sir."

"I see—fond of the knife. Well, it's quite a good way. When?"

"Last night, sir."

"And you got her away with nobody knowing?"

"Yes, sir."

The figure at the table who, while conducting this cross-examination, had been making notes on a sheet of paper, leant back again and for the first time looked Brown full in the face.

"You did well, my friend Brown. Very well. I have been reading the account of this unexplained murder—note, please, that I use the word 'murder' —in this morning's paper. The police apparently have no clues upon which to work, or at all events if they have, they don't know of them. Well, I understand that this young lady whom you have brought to me was thirty years old or thereabouts. As our friend Bert has no doubt told you, I pay well. Fifty guineas is your fee. You will be paid this sum of money in hard cash the moment you have signed this little document which I am afraid it is necessary for

you to sign before I can accept you into my little band."

"What is it, sir?"

Brown had taken a step forward nearer the table.

"It's merely a little confession of the fact that on the second day of May of this year of grace you have committed the murder of one May Perkins, in Aldershot."

"Good God, sir, you don't mean to say you want me to sign . . . ."

"Please let me finish. All I ask of you is to sign this most incriminating document. Very simple. Just a few strokes of the pen, then for as long as you remain a member of my band I retain this small guarantee of your good faith, and should you by any chance leave me suddenly, for a friendly or unfriendly reason, I shall still retain control of this guarantee to your further good faith. Very simple. Don't you agree?"

"But my life will be forfeit!"

"Of course it will, my good Brown. Forfeit to any mistake that you may make. I use the word 'mistake' advisedly. On the other hand, provided that you treat me squarely, no mention will be made of this little matter again and there's a great deal of good money to be made out of me."

The man, Brown, stood undecided for a moment. But then he remembered his friend's words, that this man sitting before him, offering him such a wonderful chance of quick money, had always treated those who were straight with him as well as they could wish. Again, he had committed the folly of a murder. He had committed it deliberately, for no purpose

whatsoever except to gain admittance to this man's gang. He had gone too far to back out now.

"Very well, sir."

"Splendid—I thought you would see reason. Remember, Brown, that what you sign now need give you no sleepless night in the future. But"—the sinister man's voice suddenly became devilish in its ferocity—"but should you by any smallest action betray the trust that I may place in you in the future, then by heaven, death will be a relief to you!"

The two men standing by the table remained motionless, appalled by the venom in his words. Brown suddenly noticed that a paper was being pushed towards him on which a fountain pen reposed. He picked this up and, glancing at the document, looked once more at the man opposite. Those steely grey eyes were staring at him, piercing into his brain, so that, eager to escape their glare, he dropped his own to another examination of the paper, knowing that he was signing what might well be his death warrant. He had now gone too far to draw back; with a quick movement he signed his name.

"Excellent," said a voice, silken now compared to the ferocity of a moment before. "Excellent. Brown, I am delighted to welcome you to the fold. Your friend Bert will show you where you sleep and will give you some further instructions with regard to your every-day life in the immediate future. I don't care to risk so valuable a member of my gang too soon after his successful début of last night. You will, therefore, occupy yourself in the normal manner on this farm, for a few days at any rate. You

will have a chance of meeting your future companions, and I hope you will find them congenial. They come from the same walk of life as yourself."

He laughed again, then as abruptly as ever, he rose to his feet and in three strides was at the door. Almost before the two others had realised it, he was gone, and the door was shut behind him.

For a few moments neither said a word, then with a chuckle Bert took his friend by the arm.

"Now then," he said, "what do you think of it?"

"I don't know," Brown replied, scratching his head. "I haven't the slightest idea. I'm bewildered, that's what I am!"

"You will like him," went on Bert, seriously. "You'll like him if you are square with him. If not —God help you."

"Would you mind turning round?" came a soft, feminine voice from directly behind them.

For a few seconds, so astonished were they, the two men stood perfectly still; then with an oath Brown sprang round one moment only before Bert, and as they did so something struck both men in the eyes, causing a burning pain, and leaving them quite powerless to see.

"I am very sorry," said the voice. "Very sorry indeed, but it's an old trick and you've used it often yourselves, both of you. Pepper *is* useful at times, isn't it, and you see I simply had to see your faces."

Maddened with pain and fear both ruffians, while shrieking for help, made a lunge towards the spot whence, they thought, the voice came; but the girl who had stood there a moment before, lithe and active, stepped aside without the slightest effort,

allowing a dainty laugh to escape her. Moving so quickly that neither of the blinded men had any idea as to what was happening or where she was, she reached the table and picked up the pen with which Brown had signed his name. An intelligent observer might have noted that she was wearing a rubber glove, and that she carefully placed the pen in a silk handkerchief before putting it in her pocket. Then, with a smile, she bid them "Good afternoon," and left by way of the window.

She was gone only in the nick of time. In a moment the door was flung open and the room seemed full of villainous-looking men who had come, attracted by the cries and shouts of their afflicted companions. For a few seconds all was pandemonium, until suddenly a voice from the door rang out.

"What is all this?"

Bert, who had partially recovered, explained in a few words what had happened. The man at the door gave his orders sharply.

"To your posts in the fields. No one is to be allowed to leave the farm or the farm grounds. Any female found must be brought to me here at once. Quick!"

The men flew to obey his instructions.

CHAPTER II

ALAN SQUIRE, seated in the cock-pit, looked over the side of his machine at the instructor standing beside him.

"No monkey tricks, mind!"

Alan grinned.

"There are not likely to be any monkey tricks," he said. "Straight up, once round and straight down, and if I get through that I shall be delighted."

Burns, the instructor, laughed.

"Righto!" he said. "Let her out!"

Alan wondered if he was really as pale as he felt himself to be. He was acutely conscious of a very unpleasant sinking sensation which would not leave him and which reminded him of nothing so much as his sensation just prior to the first time of going out to bat for his school.

"Help!" he said to himself. "If I am as nervous as this the first time I go up alone I am unlikely to make the complete dashing aviator."

Suddenly making up his mind, he switched on the full power of the engine. The graceful Moth leapt forward. She was Alan's own, which he had bought before learning to fly, stating to his friends that it is better to learn on the mount that you intend to ride afterwards. Araminta he had called her, and

the letters forming this name were painted in bright crimson just above the lower wing.

Araminta leapt across the aërodrome gaining speed with every moment, her wings shining silver in the sunshine, her tail, painted scarlet, defiantly conspicuous. The roar of the engine and the sudden rush of wind rather took away Alan's breath, although he had expected them. He crouched in the cock-pit, staring in front of him and glancing once or twice at the dials in order to discover when he might safely move back the joy-stick, which he held, firmly but caressingly almost, between the fingers of his right hand. He glanced again in their direction.

"Araminta, my lady," he said, "the moment has come. Courage, my old, as Napoleon said before interviewing the cook. Let's fly! Here goes!"

Rather gingerly, it must be confessed, he pulled back the joy-stick. Araminta responded instantly. Down went her tail and up went her nose, and immediately Alan realised that he was actually in flight, for the bumping of the ground no longer interfered with smooth progress as the machine sailed ever higher. With the coming of actual flight Alan's nervousness vanished. A curious sensation of quiet and peace came to him, and with it confidence. He felt elated; his power over the machine, such complete power, almost made him drunk with the joy of it. Alan looked over the side. He was now rising rapidly and had cleared the far end of the aërodrome. A glance at his dials told him that he was over a hundred feet in the air.

"Straight on, my lad," he said to himself, "straight on until you are a bit higher. No risks are

going to be taken by the old fellow to-day. A pleasant thousand feet or so before I turn, I think."

He grinned to himself. Never, thought Alan, had there been such a glorious sensation as this. Never before had he enjoyed himself so much. On went the machine soaring rapidly, Araminta behaving herself perfectly. The altimeter was pointing to ever-increasing height and Alan decided to risk a turn. Quietly and very slightly he pushed the joy-stick over to the left, with a result which, although he expected it, gave him a qualm or two. The machine banked steadily, the left wing tip falling towards the ground in a manner which somewhat alarmed him. He kicked his right foot forward and Araminta came round in answer to it. A moment later Alan had centralised controls again.

"Gosh!" he said, "I'd no idea I was going to take such a sharp turn as that. Just shows what these things will do for you if you are not careful. Still, I've got round."

He looked down again and saw the aërodrome passing beneath him. He grinned. The place seemed so very small, so very puny. Houses looked like tiny miniatures in some child's playbook. The hangar where the machine was usually placed appeared a microscopic shape below him, but with this thought his smile vanished immediately.

"Ye gods!" said Alan, "I've got to land on that beastly little aërodrome."

He looked down again, this time rather apprehensively.

"Of course," he said, "the nearer we go to it the bigger it will look. I am rather afraid, now I've got

off it, it's going to look very small until the moment of impact."

He had to look behind him now, for the machine was travelling well and he had cleared the farther end.

"Yes," he said to himself, "just a little farther on and then I will turn again and come down, but, my gosh, this *is* fun."

And at that moment Araminta took charge. She announced her intention of becoming obstreperous by several reverberating reports from her engine. Alan, startled beyond measure, gripped everything even more firmly than normally, with the result that he pushed forward the joy-stick slightly and quite unknowingly. Araminta, delighted that her pilot was enabling her to gallivant a little, proceeded to drop her nose and kick up her tail and rush headlong for the ground.

To Alan, Araminta now appeared to be almost stationary, but this in no way comforted him, for the ground seemed to be approaching at a most incredible speed, and withal getting larger every minute. He pulled back the joy-stick violently in his effort to right the machine, whereon Araminta, resenting this sudden roughness, had a good attempt at a loop. She rushed recklessly this time up into the sky again, and Alan, centralising quickly, just avoided that thing which is dreaded by all pilots—the loss of flying speed. Balked of her stall, Araminta looked round for something else to do, while the white-faced Alan clutched at the controls and prayed that the machine might, by now, have played all her tricks. But Araminta was by no means satis-

fied. She found a convenient upward current of air and proceeded to make her pilot believe that he had left his stomach on a lower level, until, a few yards farther on, a downward current of air, sometimes and erroneously known as a pocket, filled Araminta's mischievous breast with a huge joy.

Alan, no vestige of colour now left on his face, sat still, prayed, cursed, hoped for the best, and did not dare look anywhere but straight in front of him. Araminta back-fired once or twice just to show how pleased she was and to notify her independence to the world in general, and then, as suddenly as she had taken it into her head to become obstreperous, she returned once more to the placid and delightfully placable creature which Alan had previously always found her. But—and it was a big But—her little escapade had taken him a good couple of miles from the aërodrome. Suddenly realising that Araminta had graciously ceded control of the flight once more to her pilot, Alan metaphorically wiped the sweat of fear from his brow and settled down to make up his mind what to do.

"Minnie," he said first, "kindly behave yourself in future. Any more of these performances and I shall let you land me, and if still alive, will sell you."

Araminta made no sign that she understood, but she answered to the controls very willingly the moment Alan tried to bank.

"Good," he said. "Now, Minnie, don't forget what I have said. Behave yourself!" And with that he kicked on a little rudder.

But the mischievous soul of Araminta had not

finished with her owner-pilot for that day. With a little splitting noise her engine utterly ceased. Alan, once more thoroughly startled, centralised controls, brought the machine out of the side slip and saw immediately that, without any doubt whatsoever, it was going to be necessary for him to make a forced landing.

"Hell, Minnie!" he said. "You are behaving like a raving lunatic."

Whether these words had any effect or not Alan was not to know, but Araminta perhaps felt ashamed of her conduct. At all events, the moment that he had got her nose pointing towards a pleasant field in which a landing might or might not, but certainly should, be practicable, her engine suddenly picked up again with renewed vigour, and Alan realised that the dread necessity of a forced landing was no longer impending. From a hundred feet he rose once more to about a thousand, and looked round for the aërodrome. He was now some miles away but he could see it clearly, and this time he achieved his turn without mishap.

"Now let me see," he said to himself. "I shall cut off my engine and glide in. Therefore I should be much lower."

Rather gingerly, it must be admitted, he pushed forward the joy-stick, but Araminta, now delightfully complacent, dropped her nose slightly and rushed towards the ground.

"Hey!" said Alan. "Not so much, old girl."

He pulled back the joy-stick, and as he did so, Araminta with a pleasant chuckle of back-fires, cut out her engine again. There was no time for Alan to

waste in idle vituperation at Araminta's disloyalty; all he could do was to pick out a suitable landing-place and make for it in the hope of effecting a successful descent. He espied a green field not so very far away, which appeared to have a fairly flat surface, and this he made for, losing speed with every yard that he travelled. He just cleared a rather high hedge at one end of the field, and finally touched the ground more or less in its centre; only just in time to prevent him charging the hedge at the far end did he come to a standstill.

Alan pulled off his flying helmet and looked around him. There was no one in sight, no live stock in the field. With a wry smile he clambered from the machine on to the ground.

"Minnie," he said severely, "you are a vixen. That's what you are. A blinking vixen! When Burns takes you up and is teaching me you behave as if you were pure gold out of heaven, but the very first time that I try my hand at you alone you behave like the she-cat that you are. Remember those words: they are not spoken in jest. They form my considered opinion." He laughed gaily. "But thank you, old girl," he said, "for at any rate letting me down gently."

He bent down and clambered under the wing towards the engine. This he examined very carefully. Alan was not going in merely for the ordinary owner-pilot's licence. True, the young man had no need for making anything a profession; he had all the money, and more, that he could want. Still he was not one of those who are idle because of their riches, and he had made up his mind to learn all

there was to be learned about this most fascinating subject of aviation. Therefore he was, as well as learning to fly, undergoing a course of aëronautical engineering, and it had occurred to him that it would be rather a triumph were he able to re-start the machine before the inevitable arrival of a car from the aërodrome, inevitable because the authorities must have seen him make his forced landing in that field. But try as he might, and although he looked everywhere, he could see nothing wrong with the engine. He unscrewed and re-screwed various parts in order to make quite sure that they were properly in place. He did all he could in fact to master Araminta's obstinacy, then setting the controls right he swung the propeller.

At the very first attempt Araminta's engine picked up as if nothing whatsoever were the matter with her. Alan leapt into his seat, taxi-ing the machine to a suitable position for taking off against the wind, and thanking the stars that he had remembered this most important factor in quick rising from the ground, he suddenly opened out and with a great roar Araminta leapt forward again.

As he approached the far fence Alan looked at the control dials. Yes, he could just about do it. The throttle full open, he pulled back the joy-stick, and to his great satisfaction saw the fence flash past him many feet below the wheels of the machine. Rapidly he rose to several hundred feet and made off towards the aërodrome.

"Aha," cried Alan, "Araminta, my friend, you are not so clever as you thought you were. You haven't crashed me up on my first flight. Come along,

old dear. We've done the aërodrome authorities in too, haven't we? They never thought I'd get up again, I'll bet."

Something of the elation which had accompanied him the first time he had risen alone into the air came back to Alan. He waved one hand about, he shouted to himself, he stared round at the ground below him, the sky above him, the clouds on each side, and as he did so he saw the face of a girl looking at him from the passenger-seat directly behind his own.

CHAPTER III

ALAN stared at this fair vision in open-mouthed amazement. He was, temporarily at least, utterly unable to understand what had happened or how this remarkably attractive girl had succeeded in entering the machine.

"Araminta can't have given birth, can she?" he said to himself, faintly, and stared still more.

Araminta in the meanwhile, irritated at losing the entire interest of her pilot, proceeded to recall his attention by utilising a convenient air current and dropping twenty feet like a stone. Alan, forgetting all about his passenger, promptly turned round, but found all quiet again. Araminta, happy that her pilot was once more paying due court to her, made quite rapidly back towards the aërodrome. For two or three seconds Alan found his thoughts rushing frantically through his head in a manner which left him completely bewildered. But then one fact stuck out suddenly. There was no need whatsoever at that time to make any conjecture as to how his fair passenger had joined the machine. All that was necessary, and this was very necessary indeed, was to devise some plan whereby the young lady's presence would not be noticed when Araminta was finally persuaded to land at the aërodrome. Passengers are not en-

couraged on any flights, but are most certainly not on a pilot's first solo flight in the air, and Alan realised that the very attractiveness of his fair visitor would inevitably prevent anyone from believing whatever story he might tell. It would be useless for him to claim that he had no idea that the girl was in the machine when he took up after his forced landing. People would just take one look at her, and if they were polite and well-mannered, would smile rather than laugh outright. Obviously the true story was too thin; therefore her presence must not be allowed to become known.

Alan looked round again and saw that the girl was making some sort of signal to him. Seeing that she was trying to establish communication, he instantly inserted the connecting tube of his earphone in the plug made to receive it, and listened.

True enough, she was talking.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Pilot," came a silvery voice through the tube, "but I am afraid it was necessary for me to make use of this empty seat in your machine. I do hope you won't mind, but I don't particularly want anyone to know that I have done it. Would you mind very much if I hid myself in the cock-pit and if the moment you land you taxied over to your hangar; when I might get out inside the building unobserved. What do you think? Will that be all right?"

Alan turned round and nodded vigorously. The youth was impressed. Here was a girl whose ideas about her presence in the machine coincided remarkably with his own, and here was a girl who had made a very definitely reasonable suggestion, in fact

the only possible one in the circumstances, and had made it using terms which might almost be described as technical. She had used the word "cock-pit", but that, of course, might well be generally known, but she had also used the expression "to taxi," which, as far as he knew, at any rate within his limited experience, was a word used only by airmen. Who on earth could be his mysterious visitor?

Araminta, suddenly jealous, took an upward leap and forced him to pay full attention to her once more.

"Blast you, Minnie," he said. "You are an obstreperous young lady, aren't you?"

But by now he knew that all his attention was required in order to effect a landing. He was rapidly approaching the aërodrome, and at what he realized was too great a height. Once more he pushed Araminta's nose down and was glad that this time she responded—and not too much. He came swooping down over the far hangars on a slight curve and straightened up directly against the wind. Then, allowing the machine to lose speed, he felt his wheels suddenly touch ground, and realised that he had made his first solo landing an almost spectacularly successful one.

He saw mechanics coming, but paid no attention to them or to another machine which was preparing to ascend from the other end of the aërodrome. Turning in a wide circle he pointed Araminta's nose towards the private hangar which he owned, and opening the throttle in bursts approached it speedily. He pulled up outside and jumped from the machine, giving instructions to the men around to run Ara-

minta in, then leave her. He turned then and found himself facing Burns.

"Well," said the latter, "I thought you said, 'Straight up, once round and straight down again'."

"So I did," laughed Alan. "At least so I tried. The straight up and once round part came off perfectly, but when I came to turn again all sorts of things happened."

A slow smile came over Burns's good-natured face.

"You did well, my lad," he cried, "very well. A lot of people if their engine cut out in the middle of a turn on their first solo flight would have done a bit differently, and if they had, as like as not, they would not be here now to tell the tale. But how on earth you got her up again after having made a forced landing I don't know. Well, I must be off now. There is another solo flight just going up. I hope he does as well."

Alan flushed with pleasure. Praise from Burns, well-known as a pilot instructor throughout the country, was praise indeed, and well worth having. He turned and entered his hangar. The mechanics had just run the big bars across the entrance and were about to leave. He gave them instructions with regard to overhauling the engine in order to find out what had caused Araminta's sudden strike, and then dismissed them.

Closing the door and turning on the light, he approached the machine. As he did so a figure rose up in the second seat and jumped lightly to the ground. She held out her hand to Alan, who took it and felt a gentle pressure in his.

"Thank you so very much," said the girl. "You don't really know how very kind you have been to me."

Alan said nothing. He stood speechless, staring at the vision of loveliness before him. Deep blue eyes, heavily fringed with curling lashes, the most delicious *retroussé* nose, a dainty mouth, which, as he gazed, widened into a fascinating smile, disclosing perfect teeth, and—a complexion. It was this last which caused his entire captivation. Her skin seemed golden, "sun-kissed" he thought, for it was lightly tipped with freckles, which only served to enhance the dazzling rose colour of her cheeks. She was wearing a little blue cloche hat, beneath which strayed a few curls of the most unusually beautiful hair he had ever seen. It was a mixture of gold and bronze, gleaming as the light fell on it. For the rest she was rather small, but very daintily made, with slender legs and tiny ankles. A tailored blue tweed coat, grey stockings, and black shoes completed her attire. Everything about her was attractive—everything charming and graceful. Here at last was Perfection itself! Hardly knowing what he was doing, Alan stood there before her, motionless, enraptured beyond measure at such incomparable beauty. At last, with an effort, he released himself from the unexpected entrancement of her presence.

"My lady," he said, "I hope I have been of some use to you, but you know you have behaved in a very curious manner. I might not have been so amenable to your plans."

She laughed, and the sound thrilled him as no other laugh had done before.

"I pick and choose," she said.

"Pick and choose," Alan smiled. "Why, you don't seem to have done very much of that this morning. You hopped into the machine when I wasn't looking. By the way, when *did* you hop into the machine?"

"In the field when you were tinkering with the engine."

"I thought it must have been there," said Alan. "I must say I think you are pretty plucky, because there was obviously something wrong with Araminta or I shouldn't have chosen such a curious place to land."

"With Araminta?"

Alan laughed.

"That's what I call her," he said, nodding towards the machine. "Rather a nice name, isn't it? When she's behaving well I call her Minnie."

The girl smiled.

"But seriously," went on Alan, "what on earth were you doing in the field that you took such a curious method of leaving it?"

The girl smiled but said nothing. Alan gave her a moment to reply, but, finding that she had no intention of doing so, suddenly succumbed to her smile and grinned back at her.

"You mustn't do these things," he said, striving to make his voice harsh, and succeeding not one jot. "I might have been a very bad pilot, and then think what would have happened to you. I might even"—he paused for a moment to see the effect of his words, and stared at the girl—"I might even have been on my first flight."

The girl smiled airily.

"I know a little about flying and flying men," she said. "I know you had just made a forced landing, and I knew you must be fairly experienced by the way you did it."

"You may know a little," said Alan seriously, "but you have got it all wrong this time, my dear. It so happens that I *was* on my first flight."

"You—what?"

"I—was—on—my—first—flight."

"So that——"

"Yes," laughed Alan. "So that you took a big risk. Almost anything might have happened."

Alan watched the girl in some amusement as she appeared so completely taken aback, so amazed at the revelation which he had just made to her. In one way he was flattered, pleased that she should have thought the forced landing had been made in the manner of an old hand. He was about to pat himself lightly on the back, when suddenly he saw a strange change come over the girl. The colour appeared to leave her face, she swayed, and certainly would have fallen had he not leapt forward and supported her in his arms. Her head sagged forward and he realised that she had lost consciousness.

For a few seconds the bewildered Alan did not know what to do or how to act. Then he remembered that cold water was probably needed more than anything else. He knew where he could get some only just outside at the back of the hangar. Laying his mysterious visitor gently on the ground he ran out and found a convenient bucket just by the tap. This he filled. Moving as quickly as possible he returned to the hangar and, closing the door, turned

round. There was no sign of the girl where he had left her.

Alan very nearly dropped the bucket in his astonishment.

"Am I going loopy?" he said to himself. "People don't recover from fainting fits quite as rapidly as that, do they? Or *do* they? Am I right in the head? Have I had a visitor at all this afternoon?"

He looked at the bucket, wondering whether to make use of it on his own person or not; then, suddenly stirred to action by a feeling rather akin to annoyance at being fooled, he placed it carefully on the ground and advanced into the hangar. He looked all round him into every nook, into every corner, into the machine itself, but this last of all. There was no sign of the girl, but in the cock-pit which she had occupied there lay a folded piece of paper. This he opened and found that it was a note addressed to "Araminta's Pilot":

> *"Thank you so very much, Mr. Pilot, but please forget me and this adventure from now on."*

The note was signed by the single letter "J."

"Ha!" said Alan. "Ho! Now what the devil is all this about?"

CHAPTER IV

ALAN carefully folded the note and placed it in his pocket-book. Then, having completely satisfied himself that his fair and mysterious visitor had gone, he left the hangar and stood for a moment or two watching that other budding pilot up on his first solo in the air. But although his eyes followed the movements of the aëroplane, they were conveying nothing to his brain. His thoughts were far away, running quickly over the hectic events of the morning. First of all Araminta's erratic behaviour which had finally caused that forced landing in the field; then his surprise at discovering that he had descended without harming either himself or the machine, and his futile attempt to right the engine which had been suffering apparently from nothing more nor less than a sudden dislike for work; and finally his second ascent, clearing the top of the hedge by inches only, and his astonishment on discovering that he had a passenger.

Alan subconsciously raised his hand to the outside of his coat and felt the outline of his pocket-book. Therein lay the proof that the fantastic story was actually true. Therein lay a note from this young lady who had successfully tantalised and fascinated him to such an enormous degree. What on earth could it mean? Why should she be so mysterious?

Alan's thoughts ran wildly for a moment as he allowed his imagination free play. But he checked it abruptly.

"Look here, my lad," he said to himself, "you are talking out of your turn, I think. What is this girl to you, anyway?"

What was she to him? Those deep blue eyes, that freckled skin, those rose-coloured cheeks had taken their toll, and Alan knew, in spite of himself, that he would leave no stone unturned to effect another meeting with this lady. She was much too rare for him to allow her to vanish from his life after this fleeting visit. Alan suddenly pulled himself together.

"The immediate necessity," he remarked airily to the aëroplane far above, "is for me to obtain a drink. A forced landing and then to bring the machine back to the aërodrome without assistance on one's first flight is, I think, a feat which should be celebrated. Feet—lead me to the bar!"

So saying he walked off towards the club house, which was situated on the other side of the aërodrome. Halfway across the field he came up to Burns, who was standing staring at his pupil far above.

"Doing well?" asked Alan, coming to a standstill.

The man looked down for a moment.

"Not so badly really," he remarked. "He got off well enough and that first turn was not too rusty either. If he can get round now with the wind behind him he ought to be all right. Ah! He's going to try."

As they watched the machine banked and came

round in a fine curve, finally to straighten up and start the long descent to the flying field.

"That's all right," said Alan. "Come along and have a drink."

Burns grinned at him.

"In half a minute, my friend, I shall be with you," he said. "But how would you feel if I was not there to greet you immediately after your first solo? I'll just say some suitable platitudes and then I will join you at the bar. Mine'll be a large one—a full pint."

"Right!" said Alan. "She'll be waiting for you."

He continued on his way, but all thought of the new budding pilot and of Burns, the instructor, had left him. It must be confessed, too, that for the first time for some days he had no room in his mind even for Araminta. This was strange, for she had held an unchallenged position ever since he had obtained her.

"J," Alan was saying to himself."J. Now let me see, what could that be? Jacqueline? I hope not. Josephine? Slightly better. Jill? No, that's Gilian, isn't it? That begins with a G. Anyway, whoever you are, J, here's to our next meeting."

The room was empty when he entered, and in a very short time the drinks he ordered were brought to him where he sat by the window overlooking the aërodrome. He watched his fellow pupil making his landing, rather a bumpy one, but still unharmed. He watched Burns swoop over to him and help him leave the machine. Then he saw the tall, lanky figure of his friend and instructor approaching the club house with long and rapid strides.

Burns burst into the room a moment or two later, and sat himself down at Alan's table.

"Well," he said, "very satisfactory. Two of my budding pupils get up and come down successfully. As for you, you young rascal, I feel I ought to be thoroughly annoyed with you. You might have crashed your blinking Araminta, to say nothing of your thick skull, by taking off like that in that field. However, it's the spirit, old boy, it's the spirit. Just the same as"—raising his glass—"this is the brew. Here's to you, Alan, my lad. You have started the right way, anyhow."

Alan flushed with pleasure. He looked across at Burns, noted the pleasant, weather-beaten face, the wrinkles round the eyes depicting almost ever-present good humour, the complexion tanned because of the open-air life the great pilot led. The words Burns had just spoken were praise indeed, for the man was all too often as dour as the proverbial Scotsman.

"I wanted to get her up," said Alan, rather shyly, "and take her again before anybody could arrive to help. You saw me come down, I suppose?"

"We saw you come down," said Burns, "but we hadn't time to get a car ready before you were up again. I will have the engine thoroughly examined. I must say she behaved pretty scurvily for you on your first flight."

Alan laughed.

"She gave me a surprise, anyway," he said.

The moment the words had escaped him Alan realised that he had spoken only too truly. Once

again, quite involuntarily, his hand started to move towards his pocket-book before he checked it. What was it that she had asked him? To forget all about his adventure, to forget in fact all about her existence.

"That," said Alan to himself, "is quite impossible. But, on the other hand, I really don't see why I should not oblige her by not mentioning her presence."

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden realisation that Burns was speaking.

"I'll bet she did," he said, "and the biggest of all was cutting out when you were at a pretty good angle in that turn."

"Yes," he said, "that, I think, was just about the biggest surprise of the lot."

Inwardly he registered an apology for the lie, but went on:

"Thank God I remembered what you told me to do when in difficulties—centralise everything. Yes, centralise everything—that's what I tried to do and she came out of her dive fairly successfully."

"Only to pick up again the moment you had chosen a nice field to land in!"

Alan laughed.

"Yes," he said, "that's about it."

"They very often do," said Burns seriously, "and it's a moot point whether it isn't better to land sometimes and see what's the matter. If you can, that is. But I must say I didn't think your Araminta would behave that way because I have found her a particularly tractable bus."

"Oh, have you?" said Alan feelingly. "Perhaps she recognised the hand of a master and not her master."

Burns laughed.

"There'll be no difference," he said, "in those two things in a very short while, my lad. What about the other half of that drink?"

Alan smilingly acquiesced and watched his friend's lanky form stroll over to the bar and in a moment or two return with two fresh glasses. As he watched him Alan realised what it was that inspired all Burns's pupils with such a consummate faith in the man. Burns moved lazily, or appeared to do so, but he was neat, sure, and agile when the occasion required it, and he had about as cool a head as any individual with whom Alan had yet come into contact. Alan suddenly came to a conclusion. This man, Burns, was a friend of his—true, of short standing, but a friend nevertheless. All Alan's instinct—an instinct which had seldom failed him in the past—cried out that here was a friend whom he could trust, and as this message permeated his brain he became aware that at that moment he needed a friend very much indeed. A friend in whom he could confide the extraordinary experience which he had just been through. He knew that if he asked Burns particularly not to repeat anything he might tell him, he would be able to trust the man to keep his promise. The only thing that made him hesitate was the note hidden away in the pocket-book in his breast pocket.

"Please forget me and this adventure from now on," she had said.

Forget her? Never. Forget the adventure? Possibly, but not for the moment. His curiosity had been too much aroused and his desire to meet the mysterious charmer again was still too much in the forefront of his mind to be forgotten for an instant.

"Here's to us!" said Burns, reseating himself.

"Here's to us!" replied Alan. "All three of us!"

The plunge had been taken. He looked up to see what effect his words would have on his friend, and saw that Burns was smiling.

"Well," remarked the latter, "I must say you forgive your old Minnie pretty quickly. Personally if she had behaved as badly to me so recently I would not have included her in any toast."

Alan smiled.

"I was not referring to her," he answered, "but to——"

The sudden opening of the door interrupted him. One of the waiters approached their table.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to Alan, "but I think you have just been flying?"

Alan looked up in surprise.

"I have," he said.

"There's a gentleman outside, sir. He asked to see the pilot of the machine which had landed in a field about two miles from here."

"Ha!" cried Burns. "Farmer wishing to make use of God-sent forced landing to get something out of barren field."

"I suppose I'd better see him?" asked Alan.

"Oh! See him, see what he says. Don't give him anything, though."

"All right," Alan said to the waiter, "send him up here."

The waiter disappeared, to return a minute or two later with a tall, slim man dressed in a dark blue lounge suit of rather uncertain cut.

Alan decided immediately that this was no farmer, and he regarded his visitor with some curiosity. The latter came straight over to the table and stood before it.

"Sorry to trouble you, gentlemen. One of you was the pilot of that aëroplane which made a forced landing in a field. Is that so?"

The man spoke rapidly but not harshly, the tone of his voice rounding off the staccato sentences in a manner which avoided any suggestion of brusqueness.

"I was," said Alan. "My name's Squire."

"Mine's Brand," remarked the stranger. "Detective Inspector. Scotland Yard."

Alan looked at him with a new interest, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Burns had sat up and suddenly changed from an attitude of slightly amused boredom into one of very real attention.

"Sit down, Inspector," said Alan at once, drawing up a chair.

"Thank you, sir."

Detective Inspector Brand sat down and looked rather meaningly towards Burns. The latter immediately sat upright.

"Must I go?" he said.

"That all depends on what I've done." Alan laughed. "What's the charge, Inspector?"

Burns smiled.

"No charge against you, sir. No charge against this gentleman either. Unless one of you'd care to make it a pint of bitter."

Alan grinned and beckoned to the waiter.

There was something rather appealing about this inspector, the more so now particularly as he was smiling pleasantly. Brand took a drink from his glass and then sat back.

"Ah! That's better. Hot day."

He looked again towards Burns.

"Who's this?"

His tone of voice took away any discourtesy from the expression.

"Captain Burns, late of the Royal Flying Corps, and now chief instructor here," said Alan.

Brand's eyes instantly brightened.

"Glad to meet you, sir," he said. "I was underneath you when you got your twentieth Bosch. We all cheered like mad. Not that you could hear," he added with a smile.

Alan saw that Burns had flushed with pleasure at the unexpected compliment.

"Mustn't be keeping you, sir," said Brand, suddenly becoming businesslike. "Just come to ask you one question. What did you land in that field for?"

Alan had the uncomfortable impression that a pair of very intelligent eyes were boring into his brain and trying to read the true answer there, whatever might come from his lips. Later, when he came to know Detective Inspector Brand better, he was to discover that others had suffered from the same feeling. But this time he smiled.

"Why did I land?" he replied. "For the very

good reason, Inspector, that I hadn't a hope of not landing. I had to come down somewhere, Araminta having conked out."

"Araminta?"

Alan laughed.

"I'm sorry, Inspector. That's the name of my machine. The engine conked out and it was up to me to get down as quickly as possible and with as little bump as need be. I happened to see that field and it looked fairly flat to me, so I made for it. That's why I landed."

"I see," said Brand, "and how long were you there?"

"Just long enough," answered Alan, without any hesitation, "to get out of Araminta, admonish her, climb under the wing and get at the engine. I did practically nothing there, but occupied myself for a couple of minutes or so doing it. I then swung the propeller and she started up again, with the result that I don't suppose I was in the field for more than five or ten minutes."

"I see," went on Brand, "and you saw no one there?"

Alan started and looked quickly towards the inspector, but the latter seemed to be examining his finger nails with a curious concentration which gave away nothing. What was he getting at? Had he been there also? Had he seen the mysterious girl get into the machine and be whisked off into the air? How much did he know? And again, how much ought Alan to tell him?

"Saw anyone in the field?" said Alan, hedging. "No."

"I see."

For a moment Brand paused, and finally giving up the scrutiny of his little finger nail, looked once again at Alan.

"Well, in that case I am sorry I troubled you, sir. Was having a look round in this locality because—well—because quite a lot of things have happened lately. If you saw nobody or anything it doesn't matter. Anyhow, thanks very much. Good-day, sir. Good-day, captain."

Brand had risen as he spoke the last words. Alan and Burns rose also. They shook hands solemnly, the latter undertaking to show the inspector out of the aërodrome gates, where, he said, he had a car waiting.

Alan sat down again, buried in thought. What on earth could this visit of a prominent Scotland Yard detective mean? Had it any connection with the mysterious "J"? It could scarcely be otherwise, and if that were so, what on earth was he to do? He half-rose suddenly with the intention of giving chase to the inspector and telling all that had happened, but something prevented him. Was it the thought of those deep blue eyes, of those rose-coloured cheeks, or was it the presence of that note in his pocket-book? Alan could not have said, but he sat down again, staring out across the aërodrome. One or two machines were being taxied about. Others were standing outside their hangars, their engines being tested. He would have revelled in the sight even so recently as a half-hour ago, but now, although his eyes looked in their direction, he saw none of these things. He saw only the face of the girl as he had

first glimpsed it, and as it had captivated him when he had turned round and so unexpectedly realised that he was carrying a passenger.

He was still buried in thought and just as undecided when Burns returned. The long-limbed instructor moved slowly across to the table at which Alan sat, deep in his brown study. Quietly Burns seated himself beside him and for a moment or two remained silent. Then, leaning forward, he placed his hand on Alan's shoulder.

"Well," he said, "let's have it. Why did you lie?"

CHAPTER V

THERE was something so infinitely gentle in his somewhat startling question that Alan could not find it in his heart to resent the implication. For a moment, it is true, he flushed angrily and very nearly refused to answer his friend's question. He looked up, and catching Burns's eye realised that the instructor was very serious. He also saw that the accusation had not been made merely out of idle curiosity, but had been dictated by something far deeper—a desire, perhaps, to help a friend out of a difficulty. Alan relaxed, with a smile. After all, not so very long before he had almost decided to confide in the man sitting beside him. The question was only slightly forcing his hand but not altering the position he had intended to adopt. Burns could prove a very useful ally; Burns as an ally was just about as good a one as Alan could imagine. Burns, if he were interested—and how could he fail to be interested in the story which Alan was about to unfold—would most certainly give up everything impending at the moment, in order to be of assistance. For Alan knew well that the man's inherent love of adventure was to a large measure the cause of his amazing success as a war pilot. What could he do better than tell this man the plain facts? But, as is the way when man is faced with a confession which is perhaps a

little difficult to put into words, Alan started in a round-about fashion.

"How did you know I lied?" he asked.

"You were startled," replied Burns. "That was obvious. Mr. Inspector said something for which you were not prepared. Is that so?"

"Quite true," acknowledged Alan.

"After that it was easy. As our Mr. Brand would say, shifty eyes, uncertain voice. He knew as well as I knew, and don't you believe anything else."

"Good God!" said Alan. "Then what does he think?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," laughed his companion, "but if I may venture on an opinion I would suggest that you haven't finished with our Mr. Brand yet, and frankly from what I saw of him I shouldn't mind if I were you. He seems rather a pleasant fellow. That is," he added with a laugh, "provided you have a clear conscience."

Alan smiled.

"I've got a clear conscience from him anyway, although I haven't got an entirely clear conscience from the point of view of yourself, old friend."

"Of myself?"

"Yes—I understand that it's a breach of good form, rules, and what-not to take up a visitor on one's first solo flight."

Burns sat up abruptly.

"So that's what you were after. It wasn't a forced descent at all."

"Oh, yes it was," said Alan. "I wish to God it hadn't been, for it's taken a month or two off my life and added a grey hair or three, all right."

Burns sat back. Something about his eyes made Alan think that he was on the verge of laughter, but otherwise he gave no sign.

"Carry on, young man," he said. "Tell me all about it. For the moment I am under the impression that you are contradicting yourself."

"Look," said Alan. "I mean listen. When I went up I went up alone. That much you can vouch for."

"I certainly can," agreed Burns quietly.

"Very well. Araminta behaved perfectly until I tried to turn her for the second time. She then performed the excellent but disturbing feat which you witnessed from the ground. Up to the moment when I touched the grass of that field I was entirely occupied in attempting to subdue the devilish antics of Minnie, with what success you saw."

"A fair measure," interpolated Burns quietly.

"Thank you. Well, I have already told you that I could discover nothing whatsoever wrong with the engine, and that there could not have been very much, because the moment I swung the propeller, away she went again. I must have had the throttle a bit too advanced. I had just time to jump into the machine, turn her nose round, and get her off. I was fully occupied in clearing the hedge at the far end of the field. When I did so I must confess that a feeling of exhilaration which, I suppose, was something like a first cousin to a sense of pride in my performance, almost overcame my good sense, and realising that I had got off the ground again and that apparently Minnie proposed to behave herself according to the prospectus for a change, I turned to look about a bit and enjoy once more the feeling

of flight. I didn't enjoy it for very long. I happened to look behind me and I saw a face."

"I know," said Burns. "You shouldn't drink so much."

"When you stop I'll stop," said Alan, laughing. "Anyway it was not that sort of face at all. It was not green or anything like that—it had the right colour. What it did have in particular was a remarkable pair of eyes."

"Good God!" cried Burns, sitting up. "Serpent's eyes?"

"Nothing like serpent's eyes," said Alan, "but snake charmer's eyes possibly. I have never seen such a pair in my life. The most glorious deep blue . . ."

"Hi!" said Burns. "You can keep that for when you write out the report for the police. For the moment no sentimental stuff. This was a girl's face, I suppose?"

"*A* girl's face," said Alan. "What are you talking about? *The* girl's face. Never in my life have I seen anything so wonderful. Never, I tell you, have I . . ."

"Stop it!" cried Burns. "Or I'll have to muzzle you. Well, what did you do with her? Loop and see if she'd drop out?"

"Loop!" said Alan. "How could I loop, although as a matter of fact I very nearly did from sheer weakness. But what was I to do, Burns, old lad?"

"My name," said Burns slowly, "is Andrew. Up at home they call me Andra, but Andrew will do for you."

"Thank you," replied Alan. "Well, Andrew, if

you'd been there I've no doubt you would have looped, hard-hearted creature that you are. I don't suppose those eyes, the most beautiful pair in the world, would have had the slightest effect on your bone-headed carcass. You've become blasé, that's what's the matter with you. Seeing too many angels in the clouds or something. Personally I got all excited, and as I say, very nearly lost control of Minnie again. However, I did realise through her unduly incomparable appearance that I was fairly well for it if I landed, and that girl was for it too. Nobody would believe me after having one look at her."

Andrew Burns grinned.

"That's the first sensible thing you've said," he remarked. "You'd have been for it all right, old lad, but what did you do with her? Perform a tail spin and drop her out backwards?"

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the use of talking sensibly to this man?" he said to his glass. "I ask you, how could I have done a tail spin except unintentionally? No, I realised that the girl was making signs to me. I stuck the telephone apparatus into its appointed place and listened. It was quite true, the girl had intended to communicate with me, and she told me, in much the same words in which I should have told her if I'd been able, that she had no intention of being discovered at the aërodrome. She suggested what was in point of fact the only possible method of getting away with it, and the method which I actually employed. As soon as, to my great relief, the wheels of Araminta struck the ground of the aërodrome I made off for the hangar, she having told me that

she would lie low in the cock-pit and keep hidden. You may have noticed that I was in a great hurry to get Araminta away and the hangar doors closed?"

"I did," said Andrew, "but I thought it was just your natural modesty."

"Hark to the man!" said Alan. "He's as loopy as he's lanky. No, I got rid of the mechanics and then my lady stepped from the machine."

"Dear, dear," said Andrew. "She's yours already, is she?"

"If I could say that," said Alan seriously, "I should be the happiest man in the world, Andrew, old lad. If I could say that she were mine I . . ."

"Cut it out," cried Andrew. "You can say it all later when the times comes. Anyway what did you do next? Kiss her?"

"Kiss her?" said Alan, scandalised.

"Why not?" said Andrew, unperturbed. "She owed you something, didn't she?"

"Owed me something?" said Alan. "Good God! What are you talking about? It's Araminta and I who were in her debt."

"All right," said Andrew. "You *have* got it badly. For graciously allowing you to be her vehicle and pilot, I suppose? Stop being maudlin and carry on with your tale, leaving out the choice bits. It's silly to waste them now, you may meet her again. You didn't kiss her. What did you do?"

"I remonstrated with her."

"Now that," said Andrew, "appears to me to have been a really sensible thing to do. About the first sensible thing that you have acknowledged to. And what did she have to say for herself?"

"She hadn't very much to say for herself. She seemed to think it was quite natural until I told her that I had never flown before."

"Oh! And what then?"

"She fainted."

"She fainted?"

"She fainted."

Andrew Burns slowly pulled himself upright in his chair.

"And what, may I ask, did you do then?"

"Went for water," said Alan, shortly. "Found it too. Rushed back with a bucketful."

"The gentleman performed another reasonable action. Yes, and did she come round quickly?"

"Remarkably so," said Alan. "So quickly, in fact, that she had gone by the time I had got back."

"Gone? What on earth did you do with the water?"

Alan looked at his friend in disgust.

"Will you never be serious?" he said, rather petulantly. "Or don't you believe me?"

Andrew Burns smiled.

"I believe you all right, old fellow," he said. "I believe you all right, but—well, it's a long tale, isn't it, and I think the sooner you forget about this charming lady the better."

"Why?"

"Well," Burns spoke very slowly and distinctly, "it's always appeared to me to be inadvisable to fall under the spell of charming female crooks. They can get you into such a hell of a lot of trouble."

"Charming female crooks? You don't dare to insinuate . . ."

"Stop. I dare to insinuate anything. I tell you I don't like the sudden appearance of this most attractive young lady in Araminta's spare seat. Nor do I like her sudden disappearance. I actually dislike the totally unexpected visit of Detective Inspector Brand of Scotland Yard asking if you had seen anything or anyone in that field, and I frankly hate the fact that you lied to a man who was obviously a very, very shrewd detective officer. He knows you lied as well as I do. You answered his question for him as plainly as if you had told the truth. He knows precisely how that young lady avoided his clutches."

"Just one minute," said the bewildered Alan, bewildered in the face of this sudden outburst of rhetoric on the part of his usually terse friend. "How do you know that she was avoiding his clutches?"

"Good God!" said Andrew. "Can there be any doubt? Does love make you so blind as all that? A lady appears in your machine in the most astounding circumstances in mid-air. You let her. She disappears, making use of an obvious ruse. Tears and fainting fits are the oldest stand-bys of any woman. She is, in fact, a thoroughly suspicious character. Who the hell was he looking for if he was not looking for this girl?"

Alan, crestfallen, looked up at his friend.

"God knows!" he said. "But I should like to think it was someone else."

"I dare say you would," said Burns, "and if the young lady is as attractive as you have made out I dare say I would too."

He smiled.

"I think, old lad, that we should go and find Mr. Brand and tell him the truth. There's no point in having the truth dragged out of you by the police, and from what I know of this inspector I shouldn't think he'd let the grass grow under his feet. What about hopping into a car, running up to London, and seeing if we can find him? He said he was on his way back to the Yard when he left me. I rather think he said so pointedly in order to give you a chance of getting hold of him. What about it?"

For some seconds Alan thought of refusing. For a moment or two the thought of those deep blue eyes, and of the trust in him implied by the note in his pocket, almost made him refuse to consider this eminently sane proposal made to him by the eminently sane man sitting opposite. But he realised in the end that he could do nothing else. If this girl, and everything pointed to it, were in reality a fugitive from justice, it was his plain duty to do all he could to help authority in the matter. He looked up suddenly.

"Very well," he said, "I suppose it's the only thing to do. But I must say I would like you to come with me. Come along; I'll drive you up to London and we'll just drop in at my flat for a moment while I change. Then we'll go on, and what about a spot of dinner with me and a music hall afterwards to cheer us up?"

"I don't need cheering up, old lad," said Burns, "but I'm with you heart and soul. Now don't be a fool. You don't need any cheering up either. You performed most remarkably successfully on your first flight, and that's what you've got to remember to-

day. And if there's any love to spare floating about in your constitution confine it to Araminta. She deserves it. She's pulled the best out of you. What about one before we go?"

"No," said Alan, "I'd like to get this over."

"Right."

Five minutes later the two friends were speeding up to Alan's flat in St. James's Street, by means of the Great West Road.

CHAPTER VI

THEY reached St. James's Street very rapidly. Alan's sports car was not in the habit of dallying on the road, particularly when being driven by its owner. When they arrived at the flat Alan saw that Andrew Burns was comfortable in the sitting room before he went to change. He had been exceedingly silent during the drive up to London; in fact both men had scarcely uttered one word. Andrew had been wondering whether this were not a very ordinary case of the female crook getting away with it by means of her personal charm; he had practically dismissed the matter from his mind by the time that his friend drew up by the curb in St. James's Street. But to Alan the affair had an entirely different aspect. He, after all, had seen this strangely beautiful girl; it had been he who, with the help of Araminta, had enabled her to escape from the clutches of the police. To him, therefore, the matter was very personal and he found it distinctly hard to go through with his avowed intention of reporting all that had happened to Detective Inspector Brand of Scotland Yard.

Thoughts now raced through his mind, thoughts of flight in Araminta from the law, in case he also should fall into its power and be forced to disclose

the secret which, at the moment, he shared alone with the mysterious but fair "J".

Once in the privacy of his own room he pulled out the note from his pocket-book and read it again:

"Thank you so very much, Mr. Pilot, but please forget me and this adventure from now on."

What could it mean? Why did she demand this secrecy? The more Alan thought of it the more inexplicable did the whole thing become, and the more reasonable appeared Andrew Burns's supposition. There could be no possible reason for her strange behaviour unless it were something which could not be brazened out before the world. And then the visit of Detective Inspector Brand so soon after her disappearance—what did that mean? That the police were so hot on her track that she had been forced to utilize the God-sent chance of Araminta's forced descent into the field in order to conceal herself?

Alan smiled at the thought of her face as he had first seen it, and wondered whether he would ever gaze on it again. An awful thought struck him—the thought that possibly he might be dragged into court as a witness against her.

"Well, *that,* anyway, they can't do," he said to himself, "for as soon as I have told Brand, as soon as I have got back to the aërodrome and am entitled to fly by myself, away Araminta and I shall go until the whole thing has blown over."

He suddenly realised that these words implied that he had made up his mind to betray the trust the girl had placed in him.

"Am I betraying a trust?" he asked himself. "No, most certainly not. If by breaking a promise which I never made but which 'J' merely assumed I had given her, I can do good, whereas silence would do harm, then I must go through with it."

He changed quickly and rejoined his friend in the sitting room.

"This has just come for you," said Andrew, holding up a small package.

Alan took it and examined it with interest. It was a small parcel, very narrow, but about eight or nine inches long, which had come by hand and was addressed in a bold round handwriting. This writing, somehow, appeared to Alan to be familiar.

"Who brought it?" he asked.

"There was a knock at the door," replied Andrew, "and as I knew you were busy I went to open it. A girl brought that. She asked if you were in, and I said 'Yes'. She asked me to give it to you. There it is."

"What sort of a girl?"

"Rather a good-looking girl, as a matter of fact," answered Andrew, slowly. "I didn't notice much about her except her eyes."

Alan laughed.

"It's a surprise to hear you acknowledge that you noticed anything about a girl," he said. "Well, what of her eyes?"

"Peculiarly blue," went on Andrew. "Quite peculiarly blue. Most attractive."

"Blue? Not *deep* blue?"

"Extraordinarily deep blue—quite extraordinarily deep blue. Really very attractive."

Alan's eyes dropped to the package in his hand, to the handwriting which had addressed it.

"Good God!" he cried.

A vision had risen before his eyes of that other handwriting, the writing on that note which now reposed in his pocket-book. With a quick movement he placed the package on the table in front of him, took out his pocket-book, and withdrew the note. Andrew, who had noticed his excitement, rose and came over to him, watching his actions with some interest.

Alan laid the note close to the package and compared the handwriting. There could be no doubt about it whatever—they were identical! Andrew whistled softly through his teeth and then, walking over to the fireplace, turned his back on it and looked straight at Alan.

"So it was *she,*" he said. "Really, really, really! I must say I admire your taste, Alan old lad. Quite remarkable eyes. Very attractive!"

"Shut up!" cried Alan. "Don't waste time. How long ago did this come?"

"Oh! A good long time, seven or eight minutes at least."

"Blast!"

Alan rushed to the window and looked out into the street. He turned his head wildly one way and the other but could see no familiar form which would tally with the memory he had retained of that fleeting glimpse he had caught of the mysterious "J".

"Blast!" he said again. "You are a sickening old fellow, Andrew, you know. You might have guessed

when you saw her that she was the most lovely thing in the world."

"Pardon me," said Andrew. "I apologise, but you must remember I looked only at her eyes. Extraordinarily deep blue—most extraordinarily!"

Alan looked at him and suddenly burst out into laughter.

"Well," he said, "I suppose we'd better do now what we should have done in the first place—see what's inside this package."

"It would be advisable," agreed Andrew. "We are entitled to, I think. It's addressed to you, isn't it?"

"Of course it is—to whom else could it be addressed? To Detective Inspector Brand, perhaps?"

"Araminta, possibly!"

"Oh, you silly ass, shut up!"

With quick nervous fingers Alan pulled open the paper and a silk handkerchief came into view, round which was attached a sheet of paper with writing on it. He placed the handkerchief, which appeared to be covering something, on the table and took the paper to the better light of the window.

"Come along, Andrew," he said. "Come and read it. You are in this, you know."

The tall, lanky fellow moved over from the fireplace and scanned the note over Alan's shoulder.

"Dear friend," it said, *"When I left you so abruptly this afternoon I had no idea that my good friend Brand was so close on my heels. It came as quite a shock to me to see him calling at*

the aërodrome and actually asking for Araminta's pilot. But when I heard who it was I knew precisely what he was after. The impression of me which you now have is no doubt not very favourable, but let me tell you that Brand, although certainly looking for me, was not chasing me in the police sense of the word. At least I don't think so! I have a fairly clear conscience! No; our friend Brand was after bigger game and, funnily enough, I was doing the very reverse at the moment when you first saw me. I was trying to get away from that big game. For this reason I thank you very much indeed for all that you and Araminta did for me, and as I have no doubt you will go to Mr. Brand in the course of the near future, may I ask you to take this package with you, handling it very carefully, and give it to the inspector with my love and with the information that on it he will find the fingerprints of the Aldershot murderer? I am afraid I shall not be available as a witness at the trial as I have to keep my identity very well hidden, but a man so astute as Detective Inspector Brand will no doubt be able to find plenty of proof once he knows whom he has got to arrest. You will please give him my love, retaining a little for yourself. Until we meet again, if we do. Yours really sincerely, JESSICA."

"Hm," said Andrew, moving back to the fireplace. "A most remarkable girl. Extraordinarily deep blue eyes. Extraordinarily attractive!"

Alan laughed.

"You were cursing me a few minutes ago," he

said, "because I raved a bit about this girl. Well, if you are not very careful I'll be doing the same to you. So Jessica's her name, and to think I nearly planted her with Jacqueline!"

"Why not?" queried Andrew. "Jacqueline's French and vermouth is good."

"I see," said Alan. "Sorry I forgot."

He walked over to the sideboard and obtained the drink for Andrew at which that thirsty individual had hinted.

"Lap it up," he cried. "I want to get on and finish with the job. Do you think Brand will be at Scotland Yard now?"

"Thank you! I have very little doubt that he will from what he said to me."

Alan suddenly looked towards his friend.

"Andrew, old fellow, who the devil *is* this girl? What on earth is she playing at?"

"It seems to me," said Andrew, "that we may know a little more if Detective Inspector Brand is in a talkative mood. The girl in her note seems to imply that she knows him fairly well. If that is so and if Brand is prepared to talk we might learn a lot. What about going?"

"The sooner the better," agreed Alan. "Come along!"

It took them a very short time to reach the Embankment from St. James's Street in Alan's car, and on arriving at New Scotland Yard they found that Andrew Burns's prophecy was correct. Detective Inspector Brand, they were informed, was in the building and would be only too pleased to see Captain Burns and Mr. Squire.

They were shown up to a pleasant office wherein the inspector was seated behind a huge desk close to the window. He rose as they entered, and shook hands warmly, then waving them into a couple of armchairs in front of him, he sat down again with his back to the light.

"Well," said Brand, "delightfully unexpected visit. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He smiled, that pleasant smile which always managed to remove any disagreeable impression which might have been caused by the briskness of his speech.

Andrew Burns laughed.

"I am merely the guardian angel," he said. "It's him."

Alan, faced with making his confession, instantly felt thoroughly nervous. The armchair in which he was seated was very low and he could scarcely see Brand's face in the twilight of the room, more particularly as all the light was coming through the window directly behind the inspector's head. He felt an imperative desire to leave the chair, but with Brand staring at him he hardly liked to do so.

"Care for a cushion?" asked the detective, suddenly breaking the silence. Then he laughed cheerfully. "Curious about that chair," he went on, "makes all criminals nervous. Gives them inferiority complexes. Get out of it if you like. You are not a criminal yet!" He laughed again. "Well?"

Somehow the cheerful words put Alan at his ease.

"Well, Brand," he said, "I am sorry but I have got to confess to having told you a lie."

"No need to confess it," said Brand. "Knew it all the time. Go on!"

His abruptness was a little disconcerting, but Alan continued.

"When I landed in that field," he said, "I had no ideas in my head except to save my skin. This I succeeded in doing more by good luck than good judgment. Well. What I told you before was true up to the time when I had left the field. I saw no one or anything, but I got the machine to go again, and when we had got away I was so pleased with myself for having succeeded that I threw my arms about and looked around me, to find myself staring at the face of a girl sitting in the back seat. She wasn't with me when I landed in the field, that I know, so the only thing that could have happened is that she jumped into the machine when I was tinkering with the engine and didn't notice her."

"Pity you didn't say so before," said Brand, "but still it didn't make much odds. Acted as if you had seen her."

"What—I am sorry?"

"I acted as if you had seen her. In other words I kept on looking for her round the aërodrome."

"Oh!" said Andrew. "Well, you were pretty near her at one moment. Show him the letter, Alan."

To the watching Andrew, Brand started visibly.

"What's this?" he asked.

Quietly Alan rose from the chair and moved over to the desk, placing the silken package and the note in front of Brand. He then returned to his seat.

Very carefully, very deliberately Brand unfolded the note and read it through, then before anything

else he turned it over and read it through again. As soon as he had finished he rang a bell on his desk. This was answered almost immediately by a uniformed policeman.

"Take this package down to the finger-print department," he said. "Have it examined and let me know the result. Take this note to the laboratory. Let me know the ink, where the paper was bought, and generally as much as you can about it. I want both reports as soon as possible."

"Very good, sir."

Immediately the policeman had left the room and the door was closed behind him, Brand turned to the two friends.

"I am sorry for borrowing your note, Mr. Squire," he said. "I will let you have it back some time if you really want it, but—well—it's of importance to me to get hold of this young lady."

Alan suddenly made up his mind.

"It's of importance to me, Inspector," he said, "to meet her again too. Can you tell me anything about her?"

For a long moment Detective Inspector Brand and Alan Squire stared at each other without speaking, then very quietly the inspector gave his answer.

"Nothing," he answered. "I wish to God I could!"

CHAPTER VII

THE two remained motionless for some time. Andrew Burns, watching them, could not help but be amused at the expression of disappointment which was creeping over Alan's face. Glancing at the detective he noted that Brand was quite impassive. Looking at him one could not have told how very recently he had spoken a sentence with something as near to passion in his voice as he was ever likely to show. Then suddenly Alan spoke again.

"But it's preposterous, Inspector. You must know something of her. Look at the terms of the note. Look what she says. She seems to know a great deal about you."

"She does," said Brand, with feeling. "Knows a hell of a lot about me. Doesn't mean I know much about her. In point of fact I don't."

"But *who* is she?"

"Jessica—just Jessica—always Jessica! Keeps on turning up in this sort of odd indirect way and helping. Yes, sounds funny, I know, but she's always helping. Something I want to complete a case. Incidentally I believe this is going to be the most useful thing of all."

As he said the word "this" he tapped on his desk with his finger just where the package had so recently been.

Andrew Burns now broke into the conversation.

"You can't tell us much about this mysterious 'Jessica'," he said, "but, Inspector, how would it be if you told us a bit more about the mystery?"

"The mystery—what mystery?"

"Well—the whole series of happenings. What was the girl doing that she wanted to get away from that field so extraordinarily quickly? What was she doing that she didn't want her presence at the aërodrome to be known? Can you answer that?"

"I can," said Brand.

But he made no attempt to do so. Instead he remained quite still at his desk, frowning at the blotting paper with a ferocity which that inoffensive article could scarcely have deserved. With an abrupt movement he took up a pencil and proceeded to suck the end. Neither of the others dared to interrupt his thoughts; he appeared engrossed with something, some matters, the consideration of which would brook no delay. Suddenly he threw down the pencil and looked up.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "it seems to me that you have been drawn into this thing without knowing it and that you may be useful if you will. Useful to me, I mean. What about it?"

Andrew Burns laughed.

"What about what?"

"Coming in with me," said Brand, shortly. "The trouble is that I am working a lone hand here at the moment. Don't know what I am working against, at least have an idea but don't know for certain. It's a gang of sorts and it's a gang which seems to know by sight every one of my subordinate officers whom I

put on the show in order to get a spot of rest. Result is that they are handicapped before they start. Seems to me that if I had a little new blood, promising amateur shall we say?" and he laughed, "possibly some better results might come of it."

Alan broke into the conversation.

"Do you mean to say," he asked, "that you are offering us temporary jobs on your staff?"

"More or less," answered Brand. "Unofficial jobs, and my offer is entirely unofficial of course, too, but if you'd care to have a bit of sport and do a bit of good to the general community, well, after I have told you my story you might come in with me."

"Sounds good," said Burns immediately.

Alan looked at him and saw an eager light in his eyes. It suddenly occurred to him that this was just the sort of thing into which Andrew Burns, with his love of adventure, would throw his heart and soul. The long, lanky fellow was now leaning forward in his chair, staring at Brand with an intent watchfulness which seemed to put a new and quite unnecessary importance on every word which the former was about to utter. As he looked at him, as he marvelled at this keenness, Alan heard Andrew speak.

"If that offer is open to me," he said to Brand, "you may take it that I am with you now."

"Er—thank you, Captain," said Brand, "but I won't take that as final. Better listen to the story first. It isn't any too pleasant."

Brand took up his pencil again and started to suck it, as though it assisted him to marshal his thoughts. Alan sat back in his chair prepared to listen to the tale, but Andrew Burns did not move. He remained

"The story that I am going to tell you must go no farther, even although you don't come in with me. That, of course, is understood?"

Alan and Andrew both murmured assent.

"Very well. It's a story which you may find hard to believe, but I can't help that. Happens to be true. Unbelievable things so often are true. Some months ago a young woman was murdered in Wolverhampton. There's no doubt about it at all that she was murdered. There were the marks of the struggle, blood about the place, generally a frightful mess up, but there was no body. The young woman simply disappeared and was not discovered again. At the time it was assumed that she had been attacked and then abducted. It was not assumed that she had been murdered. A few days later another young woman disappeared in Edinburgh in precisely similar circumstances. Was seen to return to her lodgings at night. Complained to her landlady of a slight headache, went up to her room immediately after supper and presumably went to bed. Following morning she was not in her room but the bedclothes were in a terrible condition, blood again, and she was never seen afterwards. At the time it was also assumed that she had disappeared and it was not thought that she had been murdered, because there was no sign of the body. A few days later two young women disappeared on successive nights in London in precisely similar circumstances, but the second one did not disappear for ever, as the three previous had done. Her body was found packed in a trunk which had

leaning forward and staring at Brand as if unwilling to miss any word which the detective might utter.

been left in the Left Luggage Office at Waterloo Station. A man had said that he would call for the trunk. He did call and we got him. You may have read about the case in the papers."

Andrew Burns nodded. The thing had been a three days' wonder of the first importance in the evening papers and he remembered the horrible details only too well.

"The man at his trial," continued Brand, "refused to speak. Pleaded Not Guilty and left it at that. His unfortunate counsel had no chance whatsoever, and he went to the gallows without making a confession. A most extraordinary thing, if I may say so, gentlemen. Not that he went to his death without making a confession exactly, but that he went to his death without making any explanation whatsoever for the brutal act which had caused his conviction. He made no explanation, he made no excuse, he did not try to implicate anybody else, and yet it was obvious to us behind the scenes, the whole time it was obvious, I say, that he was the tool of somebody else. Who that somebody else was God knows, but I am pretty sure in my mind that that somebody else was behind the disappearances of those three other girls, and I am as sure as I am sitting here that they didn't merely disappear. They were killed and their bodies then removed."

Brand paused for a moment and lit a cigarette.

"Not a nice story, is it?" he said. "And there's worse to come, because in the last month five other women have disappeared, and they have all disappeared in exactly the same circumstances. We have kept the matter out of the papers, but that is exactly

the total length of our success in chasing those responsible for these ghastly crimes. The last one happened last night at Aldershot. That's why I am so particularly pleased at the help of our friend Jessica, because this is the first time I have had any clue at all, with the exception of the one man whom we did get, as to the murderer or murderers. You see I had hoped when we got that man that the murders would cease. They are all done in almost exactly the same way, and in our profession, gentlemen, when we come to investigate a crime we usually look to see the way it was done, and then look up the files to see the man who does that particular crime in that particular manner, and that narrows things down a lot. It is very seldom that a criminal will do a crime in a different way to the way he has previously found successful. So I assumed that this fellow was probably the author of the other crimes, and when they started again not long after his execution you may imagine how disturbed I began to feel in mind, and more so as they continued. But if I can get hold of the murderer in the case of this Aldershot crime, or at least establish his identity, then I shall be going a good way towards ultimate success."

"But do the murderers leave no trace?" asked Burns suddenly.

"Not the smell of one," replied Brand, shortly. "If they had you bet I wouldn't have missed it." He laughed. "Excuse apparent conceit, gentlemen, but," he said, "I seem to have the knack of not missing things, that's why I am where I am now. Well, what do you think of the story?"

Alan sat up in his chair.

"Inspector," he asked, "what has Jessica got to do with all this?"

Brand laughed.

"Well, sir," he said, "I will tell you what she's done. That young woman has once warned me that a murder was about to take place. I sent on a couple of fellows to the spot and they were five minutes too late. The murder had undoubtedly just been committed there, but of the victim and of the criminal they never managed to pick up a single sign. Then her second effort was to inform me that the body of that girl was in the trunk at Waterloo, and it was through her that I managed to get hold of that fellow and bring him to the gallows. Now she produces this fountain pen on which, she informs me, are the finger prints of the Aldershot murderer. Well, if he has ever been in the hands of the police before we shall know who he is, and if we know who he is our job is half done. To fix him with the guilt won't be difficult afterwards. Now you see why I am so interested in this girl. She's right. I am not exactly chasing her from the police point of view. I am chasing her because she's got information which she hasn't told me and which I must know. I don't know whether she's in with this lot or what she is. But I do know this, that nobody who wasn't in a very peculiar position in regard to these murderers could possibly have given me as much information as she has done. You see it's such a peculiar thing."

The inspector leant back and inhaled a cigarette luxuriously.

"It's such a very peculiar thing, all these crimes being committed in exactly the same way. Such a big lot of them, too, we can't keep them out of the papers much longer. As it is the commissioner's pretty nearly wild with anxiety. Chasing me around the place. But what can I do? I am doing my level damnedest and I don't get a single clue or trace, nothing at all. It must be stopped. The commissioner tells me that every moment of the day, but I know it as well as he does. It must be stopped and there's only one way to stop it and that is not getting the murderer himself in each individual case, although that would help certainly, but getting the man behind the murders."

Burns broke into Brand's harangue.

"Look here, Inspector," he said, "why should you assume that there is somebody behind it?"

"I don't know," answered Brand. "I have got a hunch, but apart from my hunch, why shouldn't I? I tell you I have already got one of the fellows who's doing it. It looks to me as if our Jessica has put me up to another one too, and this is an important point. They don't stop when I get a man, they go on and they go on in exactly the same way. They must be planned by someone else. The common or garden murderer doesn't commit the murder for killing. He is not a killer at all. He is nearly always a man who kills either because he loses his head or because he is frightened or for greed. Well, the murdered people have all been young women of about thirty years. They've all been fairly good-looking, they've all been popular in their district, well-known people, pleasant, they've none of them been rich and they've none

of them been in love. How do you fit in then the ordinary murderer with people of that sort? You don't. You can't. It doesn't fit. These poor girls are being murdered, I say are being murdered advisedly, because it is so; they are still being murdered. Witness last night at Aldershot. Are being murdered wholesale for some peculiar reason which has got nothing to do with them, of that I am certain. It's peculiarly bad luck, you say. Of course it is peculiarly bad luck, but I have got to stop it. Can't allow that sort of bad luck to be roaming about the country. I've got to get behind the scenes, not at the man so much who commits the murders but at the man behind them, and I should like to know who he is, if it's a he, and who she is if it's a she, and who it is if it's an it, and by God I'm beginning to believe it is an *it.*"

Brand suddenly stopped and looked at the other two as though ashamed at what he had said. He was very red in the face, and this surprising verbosity in one so jerky and abrupt in his speech as a rule was not lost upon Andrew Burns or Alan. The man evidently felt very deeply conscious of failure, but with it all it was very evident that he was desperately in earnest to succeed. But that he was baffled at the moment there could be no gainsaying.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "you have heard the story. I want to know if I can rely on both or either of you two should the occasion arise, should I want the help of somebody outside the Yard. I have already mentioned to you that these fellows seem to know who's a Yard man and who's not. Well, it suddenly occurred to me this evening that one or

both of you might like the job, more especially," here he looked at Alan Squire with a sly wink towards Andrew, "as it's possible, sir, that this may bring you once more in close contact with our Jessica."

Alan laughed.

"Inspector," he said, "I am with you anyway. I am doing nothing at the moment except learning to fly."

Andrew leant forward again.

"And I'm with you, Inspector," he said, "I'm doing nothing at the moment except teaching to fly."

Brand rose to his feet.

"Thank you, gentlemen. I don't say that I will call upon you, I don't say that I will need your help, but I am glad to think that I can rely on you if necessary."

"You can do that, all right," said Alan. "I don't mind telling you that I sincerely hope I will run up against Jessica again pretty soon, so call me in, Inspector, call me in as soon as there's anything doing."

At that moment there came a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Brand.

A uniformed policeman entered holding out a note to Brand. The inspector took it and dismissed the man. He opened the envelope and read the message.

"Ah," he said, "things move. An old friend. So according to Jessica the man who committed the murder at Aldershot was Jimmy Brown!"

CHAPTER VIII

ANDREW climbed into the spare seat beside Alan, who was driving, and they left the precincts of Scotland Yard and turned to the right off the Embankment.

"Well," said Andrew, "what does it feel like to be a policeman?"

Alan laughed.

"I haven't made up my mind," he answered. "Have you?"

"I think," said Andrew, "it's going to feel rather nice. That is to say if that old man Brand ever brings us into it."

"Don't you think he will?"

"God knows!" replied Andrew. "I think he was telling the truth when he said that he was handicapped through his own men being known, but did it strike you that the whole time he was speaking to us he wasn't being absolutely frank?"

"I don't know that it did," said Alan, after a moment's thought.

"It seemed to me," went on Andrew, "of course I may be quite wrong, but it seemed to me that he was telling us a lot but not quite all. There were certain things about which I thought he was a little reticent. He said there was somebody behind all these murders. He said he knew nothing whatever

about who this person could be. Well, I am not so sure that he hasn't got a fairly good idea."

Alan swerved to avoid a star-gazing pedestrian who had stepped off the pavement unexpectedly, and turned with a smile to his friend.

"I think," he said, "this discussion had better be put off until I am not driving this car, otherwise the murders may be added to! What about it?"

"What about what?"

"This dinner."

"I suggest," said Andrew, "that you should dine with me at my club."

"All right," agreed Alan, "but I must go back to the flat first for a moment. Shall I drop you at the club?"

"Righto!" said Andrew. "How long will you be?"

"Only half an hour or so. I want to write some letters and I am expecting a telephone call from the aërodrome about Araminta to say whether they've found out anything wrong with the engine yet."

"Meaning," remarked Andrew, "that if they haven't you don't intend to go up again until they have, and I don't blame you. Righto, old lad, don't be longer than you can help and you will find a drink sitting on the ice for you against your arrival."

Alan dropped his friend outside his club in Piccadilly, then returned to his flat. He left the car standing in the street and ascended the two flights to his front door by the lift. Letting himself in with his latch-key, he walked to his sitting room where he found his valet waiting for him.

"Good-evening, sir. What clothes will you be wearing this evening, sir?"

"I shan't change, Johnson."

"Very good, sir. A gentleman called to see you, sir, when you were out."

"Oh, recently?"

"Only a few minutes ago, sir. He asked if you would be in this evening and I said you would be coming in to change. He said he would return as his business was urgent."

Alan looked at the man and frowned.

"What sort of a fellow was this?"

"I don't know, I've never seen him before. A very well-dressed gentleman, sir, if I may say so."

Alan smiled. Johnson's reverence for well-cut clothes was almost a mania.

"Right!" he said. "When he comes show him in here."

Johnson left the room, and as he did so the telephone bell rang. Alan answered the instrument and was told that a small defect had been found in Araminta's engine and had been rectified.

"She's all right to go up to-morrow?" he asked.

"She's right to go up now, sir, if you wanted to," came the answer over the wire.

"Good!"

Alan hung up the receiver and smiled to himself. The thought of another solo flight on the morrow filled him with pleasurable anticipation. He felt that now he was really within sight of his licence as a pilot.

Sitting down at his desk he commenced the letters which it was necessary for him to despatch by the evening post. He had completed one and was starting on the second when suddenly the front-door bell

of the flat was rung. He heard Johnson's footsteps approaching the door and the murmur of voices a moment later. Then the door of the sitting room was thrown open and his valet announced a visitor.

"Mr. Benson, sir."

Alan looked up with interest at a tall figure standing in the doorway. Johnson was right, his caller was unusually well-dressed, the cut of his clothes smacking undoubtedly of Savile Row. He was garbed from head to foot in black, hat, top coat, shoes and gloves, so that the general effect was somewhat funereal. It was at his face, however, that Alan gazed with an intensity which would have been rude had it not been so entirely unconscious. Deep, sunken eyes, a sallow, unhealthy complexion, long, narrow nose, high cheek bones, black hair meticulously parted in the centre and a thin, cruel-looking mouth—the most evil, repellent countenance Alan thought he had ever seen. There was an indefinable something about his visitor—something sinister, unpleasant, vicious—and for a moment the young man sat unmoving, his every instinct warning him of danger. The stranger entered the room, and Alan saw that he was a man of between forty and fifty, excessively thin save for his hands, which were short, very white, and remarkably fleshy. Decidedly unwholesome-looking, thought Alan. Then, suddenly realising his discourtesy, he leaped to his feet as the other spoke.

"Good-evening, Mr. Squire. I am sorry for this unceremonious visit at what must be a most inconvenient time."

The voice was very low, very gentle, so low, in

fact, that had it not possessed a most extraordinarily penetrating power Alan could not have possibly heard the words. As it was each word came to him with unusual distinctness, and although he could not have explained the feeling to himself, Alan almost recoiled from this sinister figure. With an effort overcoming his repulsion, he signed to Johnson to withdraw, and held out his hand to the visitor.

"Not at all, Mr. Benson. If I can be of service to you I shall be delighted to do all I can."

The next moment Alan felt peculiarly awkward, for the stranger made no attempt to shake hands with him, but kept his right within his overcoat pocket. Assuming that his gesture had not been noticed, Alan waved his hand towards a chair, thus retrieving it. His visitor being seated, Alan returned to his desk.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Please do not think me impertinent," answered the man, "but what I have to ask of you is of great importance to me. It is also rather a delicate matter and in consequence I want to be quite sure of my ground before I commit myself. You will forgive me, therefore, if I ask you a few questions?"

Alan laughed nervously.

"Fire away!" he said, and as he said the words he could not for the life of him understand why he had submitted so weakly to this man's will.

"You are Alan Squire, I believe?"

"I am."

"You are learning to fly, so I understand?"

"I am."

"And making excellent progress, so I am in-

formed," smiled the stranger. "To-day if I am not mistaken you went up on what, I believe, you airmen call your first solo flight."

"Look here," cried Alan, "I don't know what all this is about but I wish you'd get to the point. I am afraid my time is rather short and——"

The other silenced him with a gesture.

"Please. This is all necessary. You performed an almost unparalleled feat this afternoon. You made a forced landing and you got your machine into the air again. Utterly remarkable performance on a first flight."

In spite of himself Alan flushed with pleasure, all his resentment vanishing before the insidious flattery.

"Well," he said, "I was lucky."

"Possibly a little luck came into it," remarked the stranger suavely, "but certainly a great deal of skill as well. I congratulate you, sir, and now I can get to the point, for I have made it quite certain that you are the man I have been looking for. You will forgive me if I go into a little domestic history. You will understand that I dislike having to say what I am about to say as much, no doubt, as you will dislike hearing it. But I have to inform you that I have a daughter who is, I am sorry to say, a little bit . . . well—shall we say?—peculiar. I have to look after her very carefully. I suppose I should really have sent her to a home some time ago, but—well—you can understand that as I have the means I should much prefer to keep her with me. Unfortunately this afternoon she escaped from my house. It so happens that I have arranged my grounds with high wire

fences all around and only two gates, both of which are always guarded. They are fairly extensive grounds and as soon as she was missed she was searched for. Unfortunately we could not find her and both the guardians of the gates, who are entirely to be trusted, informed me that she did not leave by them. An aëroplane, however, landed in a field within my grounds. It was only there a short time and it was seen to rise again. That was your aëroplane."

Alan, who had looked away as some instinct warned him of what was coming, felt that the stranger's eyes were fixed on him, watching for some sign. Staring out of the window he tried to collect his thoughts, to keep cool. Of his visitor's story he believed not one word, but he knew that had it not been for his recent interview with Inspector Brand, he would have accepted the tale as perfectly plausible and one that he was bound to credit. In the light of his further knowledge, however, a very different conclusion was to be drawn from this unexpected visit. The girl herself had said, in her letter accompanying the silken package, that at the time she concealed herself in the aëroplane she was not so much escaping from Detective Inspector Brand as from the quarry which he was chasing. Could it be that this man confronting him was concerned with the chain of foul murders which had so exercised the minds of those in authority? Could it be . . .

A voice interrupted his thoughts.

"You are finding this question a little difficult to answer, perhaps."

Alan realised that he must speak. He turned round and met the stranger's eyes with as much boldness as he could muster.

"I really don't quite understand you, sir," he said. "Are you implying that I helped your daughter to escape?"

The other laughed.

"Tut! tut!" he said. "You have misunderstood me. Of course not. But it's just possible that she concealed herself in your aëroplane and that when you got to the aërodrome you found you had an unexpected and unwelcome visitor."

Alan felt that the man's eyes were boring into his head, seeking to force him into an acknowledgment of the truth.

"But," he answered, as lightly as he could. "What an extraordinary idea! Such a thing would be practically impossible, sir. For one thing, visitors are not encouraged in aëroplanes piloted by those who have not yet obtained their licences."

"I am afraid," answered the stranger, "that you are wilfully misunderstanding me. I am not suggesting that you took up my daughter knowingly. I am suggesting that she concealed herself in your machine. Did you or did you not find that she was with you when you reached the aërodrome?"

Alan took the plunge.

"I did not," he said.

"Are you quite sure?" asked the other. "My information leads me to suppose that you are telling me a lie."

Alan seized the opportunity. He rose to his feet, moved over to the mantelpiece and rang the bell.

"I am not here, sir," he said, "to be insulted in my own house by a stranger."

The man rose from his chair and bowed. As he did so Johnson opened the door and the stranger went out, the front door slamming behind him a moment later.

For a few seconds Alan remained motionless, undecided how to act. He felt that Brand ought to be informed of this visit as soon as possible, but realised that that could wait for a little while at any rate. If only he could discover who the stranger was, and what he was after! Suddenly it dawned on him that his best plan would be to follow this man, to shadow him to some place where he might later be picked up by a real detective. No sooner had this occurred to him than he started to put it into action. He dashed to the door, flung it open and a moment later was out on the landing. The intruder had used the lift. Alan ran down the stairs until he reached the last landing, whence he could see the lift door. It was just being closed: the man had evidently only a second before left it. Very cautiously Alan descended the last few steps until he could see the front door to the block of flats. This also was just closing and through the glass he could see the sinister figure of the man who had paid him so unpleasant a visit. For a moment he watched to see which way the man would turn, and to his surprise saw him advance across the pavement, moving now with unexpected agility in distinct contrast to the slow, lethargic manner in which he had hitherto walked. A second later and Alan realised the fellow's intention. With a cry he sprang forward, but even

as he did so he knew it was useless. The stranger had entered Alan's car and the latter had reached the pavement only in time to see his sports model disappearing round the corner into Pall Mall.

Quickly making up his mind, he turned on his heel, rushed up the two flights of stairs to his flat, shot through the door, much to the astonishment of Johnson, and made straight for the telephone. A minute later he was connected with the nearest police station, had given details of his car and of the amazingly audacious robbery; he then got on to Scotland Yard and asked to speak to Detective Inspector Brand. The connection was made with very little loss of time, and in as few words as possible Alan explained to the inspector precisely what had occurred.

"Oh!" said Brand. "Thank you very much. Let's have the number of your car and its description."

Alan gave the information.

"Well," went on Brand, "I'll have that circulated at once. Wonder if your visitor had anything to do with the present I have just received."

"A present?"

"Yes, not a very pleasant one. A trunk has just been deposited here in some utterly unexplained manner, labelled to me. It was brought up to this room and I have only opened it a few minutes ago. It contained the body of a man."

"What!"

The information was so unexpected, so horrible that Alan suddenly felt the sweat of fear break out on his forehead. He scarcely dared to put his next question.

"Who was it?"

"A man you don't know at all, but I have met him before. A fellow with rather an unpleasant criminal record, by name of Jimmy Brown. You know, the man who Jessica told us had committed the Aldershot murder. I think he must have, because there was a note pinned to the knife which was sticking into his heart. This note was addressed to me and it told me that as the connection between the Aldershot murder and the man who wrote the note had been established, the man Brown was no longer of any use to this mysterious individual. As a consequence he made me a present of him."

Alan let the receiver drop through his nerveless fingers.

CHAPTER IX

In a moment Alan recovered from the shock and horror of this revelation. Picking up the receiver again he placed it to his ear and tried frantically once more to get into communication with Brand—but the line was dead; evidently the inspector had rung off on hearing no further sound from Alan's end. He replaced the receiver, rose to his feet, and walked over to the fireplace. Very deliberately he took his cigarette case from his pocket, removed a cigarette and lit it. He found that the hand which held the match was shaking, and, try as he would, for a moment or two he could not keep his nerves under control. The whole adventure, which had started in so light-hearted a manner with the promise of, at the very most, a mild flirtation, was now developing into something intensely sinister. It seemed as though he were being dragged, willy-nilly, into an atmosphere of crime of which he had hitherto been unaware, outside the stories he had read of such activities. He shook himself metaphorically and inhaled a deep breath from his cigarette through his lungs.

"Steady, old lad, steady," he said to himself. "Don't go and lose your head. You have already lost your car and you may lose a lot more things

before you've finished, but that's one thing you want to keep."

He laughed at his poor jest, but it served his purpose. He saw, to his relief, that his cigarette no longer shook between his fingers, and realised that he was once more in full control of himself. What to do—that was the question. There seemed nothing more to be done except to keep his appointment with Andrew Burns at the latter's club and to inform him of the latest developments. As he thought of his disagreeable caller, visualized once more the sallow face, the evil, sunken eyes, the thin, cruel mouth, he felt a wave of nervousness again bid fair to overcome his good sense. Could it be that that sinister individual who had so lately been seated in the chair just to his left, was the instigator of those foul crimes which were paralysing the countryside and engrossing the best brains in Scotland Yard to no purpose? Could it be that he had been in conversation with the vilest criminal that Inspector Brand, in all his wide experience, had ever known? Could it be . . . ?

"Stop it!" said Alan to himself. "This is too stupid. You are just working yourself up and to no purpose whatsoever. You'd far better go and partake of that short one which Andrew promised at his club. He has a cool brain, anyway. I'll ask him what to make of it."

The decision once taken, Alan wasted no time on carrying it out. He first rang the bell and informed Johnson that he would not be in until late and that the man could have an evening off, did he so desire. He then left the sitting room and took his hat from

the stand in the hall. As he did so the letter box was suddenly thrown open and an envelope pushed through. A sharp rat-rat on the door startled him momentarily in his rather jangled state of nerves.

Walking over to the door, he picked up the envelope and was astonished to note that it was marked "Urgent. By hand." Surely a missive sent by hand was not usually delivered in the best postman's manner! A premonition of something strange caused Alan to grip the door and open it abruptly, but there was no one outside. He moved quickly to the end of the landing and looked over the banisters but could see no one descending the stairs. Evidently whoever had delivered the note had wasted no time dallying about the place.

Thoughtfully Alan returned to his sitting room, closed the door, and looked once more at the envelope in his hand. It was addressed in a peculiarly sharp, angular handwriting to *"Alan Squire"*. Alan frowned, then slitting open the envelope he withdrew a sheet of paper. Something made him glance first at the signature, and as he read the inscription he moved over to his desk and seated himself at it. He spread the letter out before him, smoothing the sheet of paper until it was flat, but he could not have made himself read the note immediately any more than he could stop his hand from shaking on the table. There was no name at the end of that letter, no signature; he had seen only the words, *"Your recent visitor whom, I am afraid, you did not welcome,"*

Alan pulled himself together, and with his hands propping his head, he read the letter:

"My dear Squire," it read, *"I am sorry to have had to punish you to the extent of removing your car. No doubt by now you have rung up the police in an attempt, which I am afraid is bound to be futile, to recover it. I felt that I had to take it in order to punish you slightly for your pig-headed attitude at our interview. Had you given me full information with regard to Jessica, nothing unpleasant would have happened to you. As it is nothing further will happen to you unless you once again get in my way. I have taken the car merely as a little lesson to you that I do not allow anyone to interfere with me and get away with it. Please remember this in the days that follow, for if you feel tempted to look either for Jessica or for myself I should advise you to dismiss the thought from your mind. Jessica is an elusive lady, and as for myself, I do not welcome visitors any more than you do."*

Alan could scarcely believe his eyes. The letter was so unnecessary, such a piece of bravado and downright impertinence, but it showed one thing very clearly, it showed that this man had such complete faith in his own powers that he was prepared to go to almost any lengths, to take any risks, in order to create a sensation. Alan could not deny that there might be a great deal of truth in the warning it contained. A man who could behave as this strange individual had behaved must be a fellow of great power. If he was in reality the man who had murdered the luckless Brown in cold blood merely because the latter was no longer useful to him, and

had then had the audacity to send the body enclosed in a trunk to Scotland Yard, the very hub of all activities against him, he was indeed dangerous, and for the first time Alan really appreciated all that he had let himself in for when he had told Brand that he would help him if his assistance were ever required. What use could he be, pitted against this monster—against this warped brain which was capable of instigating so many ghastly murders in such a way that the best intelligences of Scotland Yard were powerless to avenge them? It was laughable, bizarre, that he, Alan Squire, whose greatest anxiety up to yesterday had been the taming of Araminta, should now be confronted with a task of such insuperable difficulty, of such dire peril. How could he, how could Andrew, hope to succeed when others infinitely better-trained, more versed in the ways of the criminal world had failed so entirely? But there was no use in indulging in this retrospect: it only served to unnerve him and shake his resolution. Even as he thought thus, however, once more he saw those deep blue eyes, those cheeks, the colour of rose petals—and he smiled.

Rising to his feet he carefully folded the note and replaced it in the envelope, which he put in his pocket-book. For the second time he left his sitting room, seized his hat from the stand, and leaving the flat was in St. James's Street a moment or two later. He hailed a taxi and was driven to Andrew Burns's club.

Rather to his surprise he found that Brand was with Andrew, and he was soon aware that the latter had been placed in possession of all the facts as far

as they were then known. But Alan's letter was a new bombshell to them both, and Brand's good-natured face became extremely serious as he studied it.

"Don't like it, gentlemen," he said, "not one little bit. No, sir. The thing's getting ugly. Evidently this fellow is the man we are after, but he is a difficult sort of Johnnie to find anything out about."

"I wonder what he has done with my car?" remarked Alan.

"Oh!" said Brand, "I am sorry, I forgot to tell you. It has been found on the Staines Road. Complete write off, I'm afraid."

"Write off—what do you mean?"

"Crashed. Insurance Company will have to cough up the whole amount."

"Do you mean to say that it's hopelessly crashed up?"

"Yes," answered the Inspector.

"But then——" Alan could scarcely conceal his excitement. "The fellow must have had an accident. He must have . . ."

"Not on your life," said Brand; "save a lot of trouble if he had, but he hasn't. That car was taken to the top of a hill, put into neutral, and shoved off. That's what happened to it. It hit a tree when travelling at a good sixty, I should say, at least that's what they say it looks like."

"Damn the fellow," said Alan, with feeling. "By heaven, I've got a real grouse against him now. You will call us in soon?"

"I will," said Brand; "sooner than you expect possibly. But for the moment please carry on just

as usual. You see this fellow knows of your connection with Jessica. Therefore he may keep you under observation. If he sees you trotting about with me too much, well then you become just about as useful to me as my own men at the Yard, or perhaps not quite so useful." He laughed. "Don't misunderstand me, but what I mean is this: they are known to this fellow, I have proved that you are not; that is where your usefulness comes in. If, however, this lad connects you with the police you are just about as useless to me as you could possibly be, because you will be on the same plane as my own men without their training. No, sir, your job at the moment is to carry on just as usual, to pretend in fact that you are following his advice and taking no more interest in his ugly face or beautiful Jessica's."

Alan smiled.

"I get you, Inspector, but when you get a chance you will let us in, won't you?"

"You bet I will. Of course there's just a small possibility that this show may peter out to-night."

"Peter out to-night?" Andrew sat upright in his chair and put the question with a childlike eagerness and an almost stupid expression of disappointment in his face.

Brand grinned.

"I know you'd like to be in it," he said, "and I am not sure that I wouldn't prefer the thing to go on and have a better finish anyway, but you see I cannot waste time. As soon as Mr. Squire here rang me up and told me that this fellow claimed to own a field in which he made his forced landing this after-

noon I sent the Flying Squad off to raid that particular estate. They are going to ring me up here as soon as there's any news."

"Good God!" said Alan, "I never thought of that."

Brand laughed.

"I am not surprised," he said. "It's the training, that's all. But you mark my words, I'll bet we shan't find anything. That unwelcome stranger knows more about this job than to let himself be got that way."

A waiter approached Andrew and asked if he had a guest in the club by name of Brand, who was wanted on the telephone. Andrew and Alan accompanied the inspector to the telephone booth and waited outside while the latter held a short conversation. Brand came out with a smile on his face a few moments later.

"As I said," he remarked, "an empty farm, empty grounds. Whole place deserted. They must have packed up even before that fellow came to visit you. Well, well, now we have got to find a new trail."

And then suddenly with furrowed brows he spoke with greater venom than Alan would have believed possible if he had not heard him.

"Not a trace, nothing to go on. Disappeared into the blue again. God—what a man!"

CHAPTER X

THE three days that followed brought no message from Brand, and Alan and Andrew both pursued their normal occupations, all the while intensely eager to receive some sign that their help was required. The time passed less irksomely for Alan than for Andrew, as the former had his flying to interest him and on the second day succeeded in passing his test for an "A" licence as a pilot. They celebrated this feat the same evening by dining together at Alan's flat, but all the while, although no word of other matters was specifically mentioned, their minds were by no means engaged with Alan's small success which had furnished an excuse for the feast. Twice he was called to the telephone, twice he jumped up to answer it, all eagerness, twice he returned to the table and shook his head with a dismal smile at Andrew.

Just before the lanky instructor left his pupil he turned to him, saying, "Old lad, I do wish I could meet those deep blue eyes again."

Alan smiled a trifle wistfully.

"Not half as much as I do," he answered.

But that was the only reference made between the two to the matters which were so deeply engrossing their thoughts.

On the following morning Alan, as usual, took

Araminta up and flew around the countryside for an hour or so, trying out the controls in various positions with a view to seeing what would happen. Araminta behaved perfectly. Her wings, shining in the sunlight, presented a pretty picture to her pilot-owner and she answered the controls as if she were some high-spirited and highly bred animal. He found it difficult to believe that she was nothing more nor less than spars and fabric, and had no living, pulsating soul within her. On descending Alan instructed his mechanics to perform some minor alterations providing they could obtain the consent of Andrew Burns to do so, the latter being at the time in the air, engaged in teaching another budding pilot. Alan decided not to await his descent but to proceed to London immediately. He wandered to the parking ground where he had left the little car which he had hired temporarily to replace his own that had been destroyed by his sinister visitant, and starting her up he took the Great West Road towards London, driving very slowly, his thoughts far removed from the road and the passing traffic.

His mood was restive. The continued inaction, with no word from Brand, was telling upon his nerves. He felt depressed, wondering if he was never again to see that glorious face of which he had caught so fleeting a glimpse. He wondered if the mysterious Jessica had passed out of his life for ever after having entered it just long enough thoroughly to unsettle him. If there were such a thing as Fate, if certain things were bound to follow a predestined course, surely it was written that they two should

meet again. Never before had any girl so vitally impressed him; never had he felt more than a quite impersonal admiration for feminine beauty—but this was different. She was his ideal, wonderfully attractive, obviously intelligent, fearless and withal possessed of that dangerous fascination—the lure of mystery, of the unknown. And she had gone, vanished into the blue; unless the Fates willed otherwise, she was irrevocably lost to him.

Alan applied his brakes suddenly as he realised that a policeman was holding up the traffic at a crossroad. He pulled up just in time to avoid bumping a car in front, and laughed to himself.

"Look here, my lad," he said. "Don't you go talking to the driver like this, making him think of other things. Otherwise, having risked your neck in the air you'll lose it on the ground, which would be silly!"

Thereupon he looked around him. The policeman released the traffic once more, but Alan had to wait a moment or two for the car in front to proceed, its engine having stopped, and being apparently reluctant to re-start.

A great, yellow racing car, fitted with a saloon body, passed him, coming in the opposite direction, the driver leaning forward to change gear just as she came opposite. Through the mist of abstraction there suddenly dawned on Alan's brain a vivid and perfectly focused impression of the face which had occupied his thoughts for so long. He sat up with a jerk. He had only obtained the slightest glimpse, but that was enough—he would have known Jessica anywhere.

Alan did not stop to think but acted on instinct; the car in front had just begun to move, and slipping his gear into place Alan pulled hard on the steering wheel and shot round out of his line of traffic into the oncoming one, narrowly missing another car and earning many lurid expletives from the drivers who were forced to swerve in order to avoid him. Putting on all the speed of which the little car was able, Alan shot in pursuit, but it was soon apparent that the task was hopeless. Jessica's car was a well-known racing model, capable of very high speeds on the road, while Alan's could attain only fifty at the very most, and this with everything shrieking and screeching protest. His heart sank within him. Was he to have been so near and yet once more to lose her? Was he to let this mysterious but alluring girl pass through his fingers again? Was his cursed luck to fail him to this extent, that like a needle from a haystack he had found her, only, like a needle dropped into a haystack, to lose her once more?

And then suddenly Alan threw back his head and shouted, shouted with glee. The driver of a sedate Daimler which he was passing at the time started and stared open-mouthed at the strange figure which Alan presented in his little car as he shot past. For he was laughing; a great idea had come to him, an idea which thrilled him to the very core. He would not lose Jessica, no, by heavens, not this time! Araminta, she would save him, she would be the means whereby Jessica, drive like fury if she so willed, could not escape him.

Making a mental note that Jessica in her great yellow car was proceeding down the Staines Road,

Alan turned off towards the aërodrome with all speed, and pulling up outside left the little car stranded at the gate and ran full-pelt towards the hangar wherein Araminta was housed. To his great relief he saw, as he ran, that the mechanics had not yet pushed her home: she was still standing, gleaming in the sunlight where he had left her in front of the hangar, the mechanics busying themselves with the engine. They saw him running towards them when he was about twenty yards distant, and he shouted to them to make her ready for flight. He pulled on his flying helmet, jumped into the cock-pit, and taxied her to a starting point which would enable him to rise into the wind; then letting her out Alan rushed frantically across the aërodrome and sailed gracefully into the air.

He calculated that Jessica could not have yet reached Staines, so he made straight for the town, rising to about two thousand feet. He knew it was contrary to regulations to fly any lower over a town or village, but determined, if necessary, to risk the vengeance of authority. Following along the road he glanced in every direction for a sight of a bright yellow car, assuring himself against the doubt, which was beginning to creep into his mind, that he could not miss it in the sunshine of the glorious day. But as the minutes wore on, as he passed over Staines he realised that the task was going to be a great deal harder than he had supposed. He looked about him and saw that unless Jessica had taken the by-road to Chertsey after Staines Bridge, she was bound to have continued on the main Portsmouth Road.

He continued along it for a mile or so, and then descending to about a hundred feet from the ground, proceeded to circle, his eyes all the while glued on the road. He was now able to discern the colour of the cars below, but no yellow one hove into sight, and his heart sank within him.

Just as he was about to straighten up and make off towards the Chertsey road in the forlorn hope of picking up the yellow racer in that direction, something reflecting the rays of the sun to a marked extent came tearing down the road.

"Ah!" said Alan. "Now, Araminta, on your best behaviour, please. We've got to follow that car, keep it in sight, and we can't go as slowly as it's going, so it's a question of circles, my girl, large circles, Minnie, taking great care that we don't make a mistake, because at this height we can't rectify it. Look after me, Minnie, if I don't look after you."

He laughed. The zest of the chase was upon him. For the next half hour Alan, making wide circles, sometimes bearing off for a mile or so to one side or the other but never going so far that he was for long out of sight of the yellow car, followed Jessica and surveyed her movements.

During this time the girl driving the car had evidently no idea that the erratic behaviour of the aëroplane above was in any way connected with herself. But the fact that it never left her very far away suddenly impressed itself upon her. As Alan came swooping over the road for about the tenth time fairly low, Jessica looked up and took careful note of the machine.

"What's that, Adams?" she asked.

The man in chauffeur's uniform sitting beside her grinned.

"A Moth, miss."

"Sure?"

"Yes, miss. They weren't used in the Royal Air Force in my day, but they are now and they're easy to pick out. You can tell by the noise of the engine, too."

"I wonder if it's *the* Moth," said Jessica, under her breath.

She now began to take a particular interest in the movements of the machine above, and when it was out of sight she took a side-road which she knew would lead her back eventually to the main Portsmouth road and her objective. For some time there was no sign of the aëroplane, but suddenly a great roaring announced its presence just overhead and it swooped into the air as if gleefully to celebrate the rediscovery of something lost.

"H'm!" said Jessica, her eyebrows coming into a straight line as she frowned. "I don't like it, Adams."

"No, miss," said the faithful Adams.

"Not one little bit."

Adams looked at her.

"We might get rid of him, miss, if we turned back for a bit."

Jessica smiled.

"We'll let it go on just for a little longer," she said, "then if it's quite obvious that he is going to follow me I think we'll have to give him the slip somehow."

"Yes, miss," said Adams, pleasantly, and relapsed into silence.

Jessica rejoined the main road and increased her speed, but she had small hope of leaving Alan behind. All she succeeded in doing was to make it a little more difficult for him to follow her as she tore along the road, and she noticed that the aëroplane was reducing the size of its circles. Then, suddenly, the pilot gave up the circling tactics and started to fly a sort of triangular course, always keeping her in sight.

"Damn!" said Jessica.

"Pardon, miss?"

"Damn!" returned Jessica. "That's what I said and I meant it. We've got to throw this unpleasant fellow off, Adams. Got any suggestions?"

Adams may or may not have had a suggestion to make but he was never allowed to make it. At that moment the noise of the aëroplane's engine ceased abruptly. As if by mutual consent Adams and Jessica stared at the machine which was just in front of them, and saw that it was coming down rapidly.

"Heavens!" cried Jessica. "He's falling."

"He's all right, miss," said the practical Adams. "Plenty of fields round here. Looks like engine failure to me."

A curious light came into Jessica's eyes.

"I wonder," she said again to herself. "I wonder. Or are you coming down some way in front, Master Squire, so that you can waylay me?"

Without another word she pressed her dainty little foot hard on the accelerator and the great car

leapt forward. Then changing her mind, she pulled in to the side of the road and stopped dead.

"Listen! Adams," she began. "I am not taking any risks. This is what you have got to do. I am going to get into the back and get under the rug if we're stopped. Anyway, I shall be out of sight. You have got to deny any knowledge of any passenger and say you are bringing this car out from London to Portsmouth to meet your master who is a naval officer. Got that?"

"Yes, miss," said the imperturbable Adams.

"Good! Carry on."

Jessica scrambled into the back seat, sat down in the tonneau of the car, and Adams let in the gear and the car glided forward once more.

Meanwhile Alan in the air was using the most unparliamentary language.

"Minnie!" he said, "I told you not to let me down. What the devil's happened?"

But what had happened was only too obvious. Adams down below had described it as "engine failure". Engine failure of a sort it undoubtedly was, but Alan suddenly realised the true cause. He had been flying that morning for nearly three hours but had forgotten to have the tank filled up again before starting on this flight. Araminta was obviously without sustenance.

"Blast!" said Alan. "Sorry, Minnie, my fault, I see."

With that he proceeded immediately to look around him for a suitable landing place. Some two or three hundred yards ahead of him he saw a field which he thought he could just about reach. It

looked flat enough and he set Minnie's nose pointing straight for it. There was plenty to do and to think of in order to effect a forced landing, but all the time as he approached the ground his thoughts were with the car below. Was it possible that Jessica was to escape him after all? Was it possible that he would be balked of the fruits of his enterprise in recognising her and following so rapidly?

"No!" said Alan, as a half-formed thought flew into his brain. "By gosh, no! I believe this is going to be a useful mischance after all."

He occupied himself fully in landing safely and then taxied gently along the ground. She came to a standstill in the middle of a field and Alan promptly jumped from the cock-pit and ran towards the road at a good speed, reaching it when the great yellow car hove into sight travelling sedately along some hundred yards or so away.

Alan scrambled over the hedge and advanced into the middle of the road holding out his hand. Obedient to his signal the yellow car promptly pulled up and stopped in front of him. Alan approached the driver with the intention of asking for the loan of a can of petrol; his plan had been then to recognise Jessica and on some pretext to get her to take him on with her, or at all events to establish some means of communication for the future. But when he saw the imperturbable face of a chauffeur looking out at him, and no sign whatever of the fair Jessica, Alan's heart dropped to his very boots. Had he been wasting all this time following a car which did not contain Jessica? Had he made a mistake?

Alan realised that he could not possibly have done

so. The features which comprised the beauty of Jessica were unforgettable, and he had been privileged to see them in circumstances which had engraved them indelibly upon his mind. No, Jessica had been driving that car all right, and its unique properties and colour made Alan quite certain that he had not been chasing the wrong car.

He advanced, therefore, to the side of the chauffeur and made his original request.

"I am sorry to trouble you," he said, "but I have just had to make a forced landing for want of petrol. If you have a spare can I should very much like to buy it off you."

The chauffeur smiled.

"I am sorry, sir," he said, "but I haven't got one. All my fuel's in the tank and I can't get it out. Tell you what I'll do. I'll stop at the next town and tell them to send you some cans. Will that do?"

"That's very nice of you," replied Alan. "I should be very much obliged if you'd do that. Sorry to have troubled you."

"Not at all, sir."

The chauffeur touched his cap, let in his clutch and started forward.

Three hundred yards further on, and round a corner, Jessica in the back touched Adams on the shoulder and told him to pull up. He did so. She climbed once more into the driving seat and they went sailing through the next village without a question of stopping at any garage.

"No, my friend," said Jessica to herself, "we're certainly not going to provide you with the where-

withal to pick up the chase again. It was a narrow enough squeak as it was."

She breathed a sigh of relief. It is doubtful whether it would have been so satisfying had Jessica known that Alan was at that moment sitting on the petrol tank at the back of her car and praying for a smooth road.

CHAPTER XI

ALAN'S prayer was answered. He found himself thankful to Providence that English roadmakers have so marvellously improved in their art. He was helped, of course, by the fact that the car in which he had such a precarious perch was magnificently sprung, and even very severe bumps, which did occur from time to time although at infrequent intervals, caused him little discomfort. But there was one difficulty which he found he had to use all his strength of grip to overcome; Jessica was driving exceedingly fast and at every curve, particularly at sharp ones, Alan found it extremely awkward to retain his hold. He had visions of being violently hurled into the road at any moment on these curves, visions which were none too pleasant, for the road looked uncomfortably hard to fall on.

Alan clenched his teeth and made the best of it. He had yielded to an impulse in jumping onto the car, an impulse which he in no way regretted despite the trials and dangers of his present position. Araminta, he knew, would be safe. The field in which he had landed was near to a lonely part of the road, and there had been no sign of even a farmhouse within miles—a fact which had rather surprised him. At the very worst a yokel or two, curiosity aroused by the strange spectacle of a stranded aëroplane,

might conceivably come and stare, but Araminta, he felt, would not resent this. Until he could return to her she was, he believed, reasonably secure. The more he considered the question the more certain was he that he had taken the only way wherein he might discover once and for all the home of his exquisite Jessica.

But as time went on Alan became less pleased with himself. Jessica seemed determined on a long journey, and his limbs were getting cramped, with the consequent result that with every moment he became a more likely prey to a sharp turn or a vicious bump. He began to get nervous, began to wonder whether he would not have to give up his plan and make his presence known owing to the keen necessity of saving himself from serious injury. Then, as he was on the point of deciding to give up the unequal contest, the car turned off the main road and proceeded, at a very much slower pace, along a country lane.

In one sense Alan was relieved, for the fact seemed to presage an early termination to the journey; in another he realised that his difficulties were increased by at least half. True, Jessica had reduced the speed of the car to a bare fifteen miles an hour, but the surface of the road was very different to that of the main road which they had just left. Here there were bumps and holes in plenty, each one registering on the silent but determined Alan a fresh jolt, both physically and mentally. He had, luckily, not long to endure this agony, for at the gate of what appeared to be the avenue of a fairly large house the car came to a sudden standstill, and the

chauffeur to whom Alan had addressed himself not so very long before descended to open the gate.

Alan seized the opportunity. The approach to the house could not, after all, be much more than a mile or so in length, and this, he felt, he could do on his flat feet without any risk of losing Jessica or the car. When the chauffeur's back was turned he slipped silently from his perch and rapidly sped to the other side of the road, careful all the time to make no noise. He hid in the convenient ditch which bordered the road, and a moment or two later heard the gears of the car being put into place and the banging of the gate as it closed behind it. Giving Jessica a few more seconds in which to start off again, he then very carefully pushed his head up over the side of the ditch just in time to catch a glimpse of the great yellow racer disappearing round a curve in the avenue.

He rose to his feet and returned to the road. Looking around, he was relieved to find nobody in sight. He shook himself, dusted his clothes back into some form of respectability, and then, making quite sure that his cramped limbs would once more answer to his demands, he stepped softly up to the gate, opened it and passed through. He was in a metalled driveway skirted on either side by great rhododendron bushes, towering some feet above his head—for which he thanked Providence. If anyone were to heave suddenly into sight he could easily conceal himself before being seen. Keeping well into the side of the driveway so that at any moment he could leap for cover, Alan silently and rapidly moved up the path in the wake of the departed car.

The driveway, he had thought, could not be more than a mile long, but he soon found that his estimate was excessive, for when he reached the turn by which the car had passed, and peered carefully around, he saw a stately building only a couple of hundred yards or so away. It was a Georgian house, fairly old and well covered with creepers, looking very picturesque in the sunlight. Alan, however, was not concerned with the beauty of the scene at that moment. Drawn up outside the front porch was the yellow car, and standing by it the chauffeur. Evidently Jessica had already entered the house.

One more glance convinced him that a frontal attack was out of the question. Were he to move round the corner, the chauffeur would be bound to see him if he looked in his direction, and the man was staring about in a manner which was not exactly suspicious, but for which Alan did not thank him. From his position Alan could not see round the house on account of the high bushes on either side.

"There's only one thing to do, my lad," he said to himself. "You've got to reconnoitre. Round to the front is obviously not much good. Take the back of the house and see what you can see from there."

He retreated back a few yards whence he had come in order to be out of sight from the house when he crossed the driveway, and even then he dashed swiftly over, unwilling to risk anything, and dived into the bushes on the far side. They were very thick, but Alan pushed his way through and found himself in a sort of kitchen garden. Instantly he dropped on his hands and knees. This, again, was but a precautionary measure, but any question of

garden, kitchen or otherwise, presupposed the existence of a gardener, and his one desire was to be unobserved by any human being at that moment. He looked around him very carefully and heaved a sigh of relief, for no one was in sight. Rising again, but keeping well in the shadow of the bushes, he advanced in the direction of the house, and as he drew near realised that the last fifty yards or so could not be traversed in the same manner, as he would be in full view of the windows. Looking about him, he sought for some means of approach, and it was instantly obvious that there was only one. He would have to reënter the line of great rhododendrons and make his way, under their hospitable shelter, right up to the house.

Alan came to this conclusion rather reluctantly, for progress would be difficult and was bound, to a certain extent, to be noisy; but it was the only way. A belt of trees ran towards the back of the house on the far side, but to reach them Alan would have to traverse the whole length of the kitchen garden, all the time in full view from the windows—and this he could not risk.

With a sigh he turned and dived once more into the bushes. To his great relief progress was far less difficult than he had imagined, for the bushes were old, a fact which he realised he should have guessed from their great height, and the foliage was confined to the outside. All he had to do was to circumvent and guard against stems, some as thick as his palm. But these, although retarding his progress considerably, made little noise as he pushed through them, and in many cases he was able to move for

some yards without having to squeeze through. He crept along now much more slowly in order to be as silent as possible, and it seemed an age before he suddenly realised that he was at the end of the line and only some five yards from the house.

Very carefully, very cautiously Alan divided the leaves just in front of him to the width of about an inch so that he could see in front of him. He found himself staring into a room—and in that room was Jessica.

For some moments Alan gazed admiringly at the vision of loveliness beyond that pane of glass, congratulating himself on the impulse which had caused him to jump onto the petrol tank of the great yellow car, and so enable him to trace this mysterious girl to the house. He smiled to himself. She had been driving the car when he passed on the Great West Road. Evidently she had recognised Araminta, or at any rate had suspected Alan's presence in the aëroplane above her and had determined to get clean away by concealing herself against the inevitable rencontre, upon seeing the machine descend. But with this thought came a sudden feeling of distaste for the rôle which he was playing at the moment.

What would she say, what would she think of his ungallant behaviour? She had so carefully evaded all intervention by the police, only to be discovered by him. But instantly another thought struck him. Whatever he saw, whatever he heard, need only concern him alone. He would divulge nothing to the police without first seeing her and warning her of his intention. It was essential he should glean all the

information possible about her part in the affair, and if he saw her first and was perhaps favoured with some explanation, she could not complain that his conduct had been unfair or discourteous. Thereupon his scruples vanished. After all, he was on the side of justice. It was up to him to do all in his power to unravel the extraordinary mystery surrounding this girl—what lay behind was too serious and terrible for him to be troubled with squeamishness as to his methods of solving it.

His mind made up, Alan widened the opening which he had made in the foliage sufficiently to enable him to see out on each side. He was at the end of the house, hidden from view of the front door and the car, unless the chauffeur chose to walk round the corner of the building. This possibility Alan dismissed from his mind as improbable. It was most unlikely that the man would move far from the car, and to see Alan he would have to take quite a long walk, for the house was extensive and rambling. On the other side the belt of trees came right up to the building and passed behind it, and Alan realised that he had been extremely lucky, for he could now move freely, his only risk of detection coming from the windows of the room into which he was looking. This was a danger which should be easy to avoid. All he had to do was to choose a moment when the occupants were not gazing out, which, he noticed, they had not done as yet.

Jessica was talking to a grey-haired lady seated in a chair opposite her. They both seemed deeply absorbed in the conversation, and the sound of their voices came to him through the open window,

but not clearly enough for him to distinguish the words. He knew that he had but to cross that intervening five yards and crouch down below the window to hear everything that was said within, the only risk he ran being that the noise of his approach might come to Jessica's ears. He looked at the surface of the ground over which he was bound to pass. A gravel path wound round the house, which was at the most three feet in width, the remainder of the ground being grass, part of a mown lawn.

Choosing a moment when Jessica appeared to be talking with great earnestness and the elderly lady completely intent on her words, Alan slipped through the branches, and bending double, ran swiftly across the grass, stepping carefully on the gravel. He crouched below the window. The dangerous moment had been passed, he had attained his objective unobserved! Scarcely daring to breathe, Alan listened attentively. To his joy he discovered that he could hear every word quite distinctly. Jessica had just completed a sentence, the gist of which he had not caught, but he heard the old lady's reply as clearly as though it had been addressed to him personally.

"My dear, I can't do it. I simply cannot allow you to do this. What you are asking me to do is to pass a death sentence on your uncle. It isn't fair!" Her voice rose almost to a scream. "It isn't fair for you to ask me. I have lost a daughter, do you want me to lose a husband as well?"

Jessica's voice, of that soft, velvet quality which had so captivated him when he had first heard it in the aëroplane, came distinct in reply.

"Oh, I know it's terribly hard, but I *must* make you understand that the thing has now got beyond a personal matter. Don't you see, my poor dear, that it isn't a matter of Sheila, of you, of Uncle John, of Jessica now. The thing has become so big, so awful, that it's a question of all the Sheilas and Jessicas and Uncle Johns in the country. Surely it is better for him to know, even if it does kill him, than for hundreds of others, yes hundreds of other Uncle Johns, to lose their daughters in this frightful way. If I go now to Scotland Yard and tell them what I know, perhaps some, at any rate, of these horrible crimes will be avenged. You must let me, my dear, you *must*."

There was a long silence, then to Alan's horror he heard the sound of a woman sobbing.

"Oh, my dear!"

Jessica's voice came very softly to him, so softly that he scarcely caught the words, but he could picture the scene within that room as she ran forward to comfort the old lady in the chair.

"I can't." The voice was broken. "I can't. It's a death sentence on your uncle that you ask me to pass. Oh, Jessica, let me have him for the few more days the doctors say he can live. Don't take him from me like this."

Jessica's voice, speaking softly yet with a ring of unswerving determination, came at once in answer.

"I must," she said. "I have got to. I love Uncle John, my dear, perhaps not quite so much as you do, but greatly in a different way. I don't want him to go, to leave us. I do realise that the shock will probably kill him . . ."

"Probably?" broke in the other. "It's a certainty."

"Even if it's a certainty," Jessica went on, "it must be done. You can't allow all these others to be foully murdered. Don't you see that their deaths are on your head just as much as if you yourself committed the act? Don't you see?"

"Oh, stop!" The old lady's voice came as a wail. "Don't torture me like this. Leave him to me, Jessica, leave him to me for the few days, only three or four, perhaps only until to-morrow, that the doctors give him. He is bound to die, they tell me. Don't let's kill him before he need go. God!" Her voice rose to a high-pitched scream. "Jessica, I won't allow it. Haven't I suffered enough? Sheila, whom I loved with all my heart, with all my soul, my only daughter, torn from me in the prime of her life, and now you ask me to send my husband to his death before he need!"

For a moment there was silence, then the listening Alan heard the sound of approaching footsteps. An instant of panic seized him. He crouched against the wall, flattening himself as near to it as possible. He sensed that Jessica was standing just above him staring out of the window, but he realised that she was probably fighting a battle with herself, that her eyes were unseeing, her thoughts on other things. His heart ached for her, faced with what he realised must be such a terrible decision. It was horrible: no girl, thought Alan, should be faced with such a problem. He longed to help and comfort her, but for the moment knew he must remain silent.

Then as abruptly as he had first heard them, there

came to him the sound of retreating footsteps and he knew that Jessica had returned to the grey-haired lady, whom he could so well imagine watching her, watching her every movement, gazing into her eyes in order to glean some foreknowledge of the decision she had made.

"Whatever you may say, Aunt Edith, I must do it."

"You can't!" The woman's voice was a shriek. "You can't! You promised me on your word of honour, on all that you held sacred, that you wouldn't until I relieved you of your promise. I don't relieve you, I won't relieve you!"

Jessica's voice came back, calm, even.

"A promise," she said, "must sometimes be broken. When I gave my word I thought that I was only giving it to you and that all it entailed concerned only Sheila, you, and Uncle John. But I have found out so much, so much that is frightful, that is awful, and that concerns other people, so many other people, that I really cannot remain silent any longer. It's no good, Aunt Edith, whatever you may say, my mind's made up. I came here this afternoon hoping that you would see reason. I think I was wrong. I should have acted without coming to see you, without telling you."

Slowly, containing a current of anger which was ugly, and which made Alan shudder, came back the answer:

"Jessica, if you do that I shall never speak to you again. I will cast you out from this house which has been your home and I will thank God that I have done so for every day that is left to me in my life.

I shall hate you, do you understand? The love which I have always lavished upon you, as much as that which I gave to my own daughter, will turn to hate. I shall *hate* you, Jessica." Her voice rose to a scream. "I hate you now. *Get out!*"

"Aunt Edith, please!"

Alan could picture the scene within the room as the old lady, having risen to her feet, pointed imperiously to the door, her face flushed, her eyes shining.

"Get out!" she screamed. "Get out. Get away. Never enter this house again, for as truly as I stand here now if you do what you say you are going to do, you will have killed your uncle."

"Oh, my dear, my dear, can't I make you understand?"

Jessica's voice came to him softly; she seemed to be talking impersonally, talking to someone else, to someone in whom she really recognised her aunt, and not to the furious old woman who stood before her.

"Get out!" came a real scream. "Get out before I hit you."

Alan heard a little cry, then receding footsteps and the sound of a door being closed. Immediately there came a crash on the floor and the sound of a woman's uncontrollable sobbing, very near to hysteria.

Stunned by what he had heard, Alan leapt for the grass and was quickly once more within the kind shelter of the great rhododendrons. As rapidly as he was able, caring little now what noise he might make, he sped back the way he had come, his mind

in a whirl. What was all this about, this scene which he had overheard? What could it mean? Only that Jessica, who had been tongue-tied up to that moment, as far as authority was concerned, had finally made her break, had at last decided against the most appalling odds—that of her loved ones' feelings—to go to Brand and inform him of all she knew.

Alan broke away from the rhododendrons into the driveway. He found himself just below the bend, just out of sight of the house, and ran full-pelt towards the gate. As he reached it he heard behind him the sound of an approaching car, and he remained standing at the gate, making no attempt towards opening it.

The car came to a standstill and he saw Jessica, her face flushed, sitting at the steering wheel. The chauffeur got out and advanced on him scowlingly, but Alan paid to him no attention whatsoever. Walking past him he approached Jessica.

"Miss Jessica," he said, "would you mind giving me a lift back to Araminta? There's something I'd like to talk to you about on the way."

CHAPTER XII

FOR a moment Alan thought that Jessica would have nothing to say to him. She stared at him, a stare which seemed to go right through him and which seemed as if the girl were looking, not at him, but at something beyond. He stood there nervously, realising that a great deal was at stake, for he knew that he must force his presence on her, even though she found it distasteful. Then, suddenly, she spoke.

"You appear to have been travelling across country," she said, indicating his clothes with an almost imperceptible movement. "Will you please tell me what you have been doing?"

A great deal depended upon his reply.

"Nothing of which I am ashamed," he answered, quietly.

For a long moment Jessica held him with her eyes, weighing him up, determining in her own mind whether or not she would accede to his request. Finally she nodded towards the vacant seat beside her.

"Get in," she said shortly.

Alan heaved a sigh of relief and, quickly stepping round the car, took the seat she had indicated, while the chauffeur held open the gate. Jessica let in the clutch and the car glided round the corner into the road. A moment later the chauffeur had taken

his seat in the back and Jessica had re-started the car. She suddenly turned her head.

"Adams," she said, "put up the glass. Mr. Squire has an explanation to make to me and he may feel nervous."

There was a mischievous smile twitching about her lips as she said these words, and Alan appreciated that the explanation to which she referred would be by no means an easy one to make. He was slightly at a loss as to the meaning of her words, but his perplexity was immediately dispelled by the action of her chauffeur, who, leaning forward and turning a handle, actuated a dividing pane of glass between the tonneau of the car and the driver's seat, converting the saloon car into the semblance of a chauffeur-driven limousine. He realised that he could now converse with Jessica with no fear of being overheard by the chauffeur, and thanked her inwardly for the thought which had resulted in this privacy. For a moment or two he was silent, marshalling his ideas. Jessica cast a sidelong glance at him, but let him be for a few seconds. Then abruptly she spoke.

"Well?"

Alan looked at her and was again enthralled by her beauty. The peach-like bloom on her cheeks, her radiant skin, those starry eyes, the little curls blowing waywardly in the breeze—a face to evoke admiration from the most blasé, a face to him matchless in its culmination of charm.

"It's not easy, is it?" she interrupted his thoughts.

"No!" Alan smiled. "It isn't."

"I suppose you were spying on me?"

"Spying," said Alan, "is a very unpleasant word."

"I agree," said Jessica, "but I've used it correctly to describe your recent movements, haven't I?"

Alan looked at her out of the corner of his eyes, noting the ruby line of her determined little mouth. No, this explanation was not going to be at all easy.

"I had better begin at the beginning," he said.

"Yes," replied Jessica, "it's not a bad idea in explanations."

"And it will be easier," continued Alan, "if you don't interrupt me."

"I daresay," she agreed, "but why should I make it easier?"

"For reasons which I hope to make plain to you in a few moments. May I have a fair hearing?"

Jessica flushed under the rebuke, and was silent.

"I saw you pass in your car as I was returning from the aërodrome along the Great West Road. I followed you as fast as I could but realised at once that you would out-pace my feeble efforts in this powerful car. So I made straight for the aërodrome, got into Araminta, and went up. I was lucky. I picked you up just outside Staines and for some time I flew around and kept you in sight. But there my luck ended temporarily, since I had forgotten to fill up with petrol and there was very little in the tank. Araminta decided that flight was too difficult without fuel and took me down into a field. I ran to the road and held up your car. I must confess that I was astonished and frightfully disappointed when I saw a chauffeur driving it . . . and no sign of you."

Jessica smiled.

"I was under the rug in the back," she said.

"Oh, so that's where you were! Well, you probably heard the conversation?"

"Between you and Adams? Yes, I did."

"As you started off again I ran after the car and got a perch on the petrol tank. I don't think I scratched the paint; if I did I will make it good!"

A faint smile played about Jessica's mouth.

"Go on!" she said.

"It was not very pleasant, but it was the only way to get in touch with you."

"Oh, I do wish I'd known!"

Alan knew that the girl's words were not intended for his ears, but he laughed nevertheless.

"I'm glad that you didn't," he said. "I might have had an even worse time than I did have. As it was I thought I was about to lose my life at any moment. However, I managed to stick it until you arrived at the gate of that house. I hopped off then and hid in the ditch while Adams opened the gate to let you pass. When you were out of sight round the curve in the drive I followed as fast as my two feet would let me, until I suddenly came within view of the house. I took cover in the rhododendrons, seeing that the car was standing beside the front door and that Adams was on the lookout."

"On the lookout?" cried Jessica, mystified. "But we had no idea that you were anywhere near!"

"I didn't quite mean that," said Alan. "I meant that he was standing by the car and could have seen me. However, I used all the available cover of the rhododendrons and managed to get right up to the house, finding myself within five yards of the window to the room in which you were talking."

Jessica gave him a quick glance.

"You heard?" she said.

"Yes," replied Alan. "Purposely."

"And yet," went on Jessica, a cold current becoming apparent in her voice, "you told me a few minutes ago that spying was an ugly word for what you did."

"So it is," said Alan. "I had no intention of putting to my own use anything which I might overhear. I thought the matter out very carefully before I dodged out of the rhododendrons and hid beneath the window where I could hear. For the very same reason, I think, that you visited that house, I decided that it was my duty to find out all I could about you. Frankly the situation is now so serious that measures which may appear slightly underhand must of necessity be taken to counteract the activities of the person whom I can only call, for want of a better name, the Sinister Individual. You see, I know a great deal about it. Detective Inspector Brand took me into his confidence. I am, in fact, one of his satellites."

"Are you a detective?" asked Jessica, her eyes wide-open with surprise.

"Not really," replied Alan. "I am only playing at it, but I suppose that for the moment I might call myself almost an official of Scotland Yard, since Brand has pulled me into his service. You are a mysterious young lady, Miss Jessica. Your actions have, frankly, been rather odd and have exercised the mind of my good friend Brand for some little time. You must not be surprised at having excited the interest of Scotland Yard."

"No," said Jessica, "I suppose not."

For a moment there was silence between the two, then suddenly she looked at him.

"Go on," she said. "What did you hear?"

"Quite enough," replied Alan, greatly daring, "to convince me that Jessica is on our side."

The girl smiled quietly.

"Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Squire."

"I made up my mind," said Alan, "before I went beneath the window, for I knew that I should hear what you were saying, that I would accost you on your way out and tell you everything that I had overheard, that in fact I would put my position plainly before you. It is my duty to go back now and report everything that I have heard to Brand, but I rather think that this course of action will now be unnecessary."

"Oh," said Jessica, "and why?"

"For the very good reason," went on Alan, "that I am inclined to think you are about to go to him yourself with the whole story, and as you can give it with all the details, whereas I can only surmise from what I have overheard, it is obviously very much better that you should go and not me."

Again he paused. Again Jessica looked at him.

"Go on!" she said.

"There isn't anything more to say," replied Alan. "I've told you."

"How much did you hear?" she asked.

"I heard you trying to persuade the lady with grey hair to do her duty. I heard you fail. I was very, very sorry, if I may say so, for both of you."

Alan received no answer, and, a little surprised,

glanced at the girl seated beside him. Both hands were on the steering wheel, her face was set; she was staring straight in front of her at the road, but he saw that her eyes were full of unshed tears and respected her silence. He knew only too well how she must have suffered at leaving that house cursed by her aunt. From what he had heard he gathered that the house had been her home all her life, and that she had renounced it from a sense of plain duty. He looked quickly away and stared at the countryside dashing past.

For a little while Jessica drove on in silence, then mastering her grief she suddenly spoke:

"Will you come with me to Brand," she asked, "and help me tell him? I think it would help perhaps if I told you now."

"Do as you will, my lady," said Alan. "I am at your service."

She thanked him with a smile; then, speaking rapidly, unfolded her tale.

"My parents died when I was a child," she said. "I don't remember either of them. They left me in the charge of my Uncle John and my Aunt Edith and for all practical purposes these two have been my father and mother—anyway they are the only parents that I have ever known. They had a daughter of their own, a girl a little older than myself, a girl called Sheila. I was brought up with Sheila, went to the same school with her, but somehow or other she and I could not get on very well together. I hate to say things about poor Sheila now but I think she was a little shallow, rather too fond of the round of gaiety and pleasure which came her

way. Uncle John and Aunt Edith spoilt her terribly. They gave her everything she wanted. You see, she was their only child, if you don't count me. When I was grown up I suddenly found that I was really living on the charity of these two dear people, for my father had died without leaving any money at all and they had saved me from an orphanage. I determined that I would do my best to earn enough to pay them back for all that they had to spend on me, for they had a great many responsibilities; that old house, which Uncle John loved, the estate, both of which ate up money and gave him nothing in return, excepting the pleasure of possession. Sheila, too, was extravagant, and as I have said, nothing that she wanted, no matter how expensive, could they refuse her. I found, in fact, that Uncle John was living on his capital and that there wasn't very much of that left. I told Sheila, and I must say the girl did her best. She gave up a lot of her expensive habits, she gave up riding, for instance, which was of course a great wrench to her; but in thoughtless ways she still spent a great deal. Little things, all the little things which mount up so very easily to such a very big sum.

"That determined me. It occurred to me that I had no training for any profession, that there was only one thing to do and that was to live on my wits—and I was resolved to live honestly. One day a great idea struck me; I thought that a girl might be useful, a girl brought up as I had been, to a detective agency. I went to old man Farrow and I put my idea to him. I had met him once in Uncle John's house as he was a friend of his. Old man

Farrow was splendid. I think in his own mind he rather thought that by taking me on he was performing a great act of charity, but"—here a hint of pride came into her voice—"I soon proved to him that he was not. He raised my salary to such an extent, in fact, that I was able soon to keep myself and start paying back to Uncle John some of the money which he had spent on my education.

"Then when I was having a holiday down at the house which we have just left, Sheila went off on a visit to some friends. She left them to return to us and I went down to the station to meet her. She never arrived. From that day to this no one has seen or heard of her."

"Good God!" cried Alan. "Not——?"

"Yes," said Jessica, quietly. "The Sinister Individual. At least I am pretty certain of it."

"What did the police say?" asked Alan.

"Were you listening outside that window?" asked Jessica in gentle rebuke. "We could not put it to the police and I'll tell you why. Uncle John has been terribly ill with his heart for some years now. The doctors recently made up their minds that he had only a month or two to live. They told Aunt Edith very definitely that any shock, even a small shock, would probably kill him on the spot. They're right, I know they're right, and that's what makes it so terribly hard."

Alan respected her distress and waited in silence for her to continue.

"I am sorry," she said quietly. "But—oh! I wish I'd never gone down to that house this afternoon."

For a moment or two she remained rapt in

thought, then abruptly recovering herself continued in a faint voice:

"I wanted to go to the police straightaway, of course, to report the matter at any rate, because they have facilities which even in our office, Farrow's office I mean, we haven't got. But Aunt Edith pointed out that if any breath was whispered of what had happened and reached Uncle John's ears he would die straightaway, and she begged me not to do this. You see, it would be impossible to keep the whole thing from Uncle John; it would get into the papers and it's the only recreation the poor dear has—reading all the news each day. He thinks Sheila is still staying with her friends. Well, eventually Aunt Edith made me promise that without her consent I would not tell the police, that for the moment Farrow and I would do all that we could. Farrow left the case entirely to me. He thinks rather a lot of me. He is getting old himself, and any case which is sufficiently important for him to take himself but which he cannot do he leaves to me. I have done my best. On one or two occasions I have been able to help Brand, but you see I couldn't go to him and tell him the whole story, for the reasons that you know. Aunt Edith had promised, however, that immediately after poor Uncle John's death all the facts should be placed before the police and justice done.

"Suddenly the other day when you took me up, in fact, in that field, I found out a great deal more. I found out that the Sinister Individual, whose presence behind these murders I had suspected, was in

actual fact a man of flesh and blood. I got into his stronghold, I saw him, I heard him speak, and I heard how he collects his gang. This I must tell to Brand, but for a day or two I hesitated wondering what my real course of action ought to be. At last, however, I realised that I was possessed of information which I could not withhold from the police, promise or no promise. Just for my own satisfaction, however, I decided to go down and see Aunt Edith this afternoon and be absolved from my word. You heard with what result. It is so terrible. Poor Aunt Edith. She is heartbroken; she keeps telling me that she has lost a daughter and that now I shall make her lose her husband too. It was that which caused me to give my promise in the first place."

For a long time Alan remained silent, then suddenly he felt for her hand, found it, and giving it a gentle pressure, he spoke very softly.

"Thank God, Jessica," he said.

She smiled at him.

"Why, Alan?"

"All sorts of stupid thoughts rushed through my brain when you disappeared so mysteriously, my dear. I felt suspicious, of what I didn't really know; but your actions were so extraordinary, your letter enjoining me to silence struck me as being so odd that, frankly, I was perplexed. I didn't know which side you were on, you see."

Jessica smiled.

"You know now," she said. "And I am glad. Oh, so glad. Let's get to Brand at once and tell him."

"Yes," agreed Alan. "We will, as fast as this car can take us."

An idea instantly struck him.

"My dear," he cried suddenly, "why shouldn't we stop at a village and get some petrol? Why shouldn't we take up Araminta and you go with me? We'll do it ever so much faster then."

Jessica's eyes sparkled.

"Oh! What fun!" she cried.

No sooner said than done. At the next village they stopped and picked up a sufficient quantity of petrol to take them home. They were fairly near the field wherein the stranded Araminta waited, and a quarter of an hour or so later Jessica brought the great car to a standstill at the very spot where Alan had previously waylaid it. Adams helped to carry the tins of petrol to the aëroplane, which was standing in the field exactly as Alan had left it. They filled the tank; Adams then departed with instructions from Jessica to take the car to her flat in London.

Jessica jumped into the passenger's cock-pit and Alan swung the propeller. Araminta, however, gave no sign of life. Alan tried again, with the same result. Jumping from her seat, Jessica stood beside him and together they examined the engine.

"Blast!" said Alan. "Somebody's been monkeying with her. Look! No plugs. Do you think Adams has gone yet?"

Jessica smiled wistfully.

"So it's to be the car after all," she said. "I'm sorry. I was looking forward to this flight. No, I don't think so. Let's run to the road and see."

They turned—and stopped dead in their tracks. Alan felt the sweat of cold fear suddenly break out upon his forehead; for he found himself staring into the unswerving muzzle of an automatic.

"Good afternoon," said the suave voice of the Sinister Individual. "A happy reunion I think. I have been looking for you two for some days now."

CHAPTER XIII

FOR a long moment there was silence. Neither Alan nor Jessica could utter a word in their surprise and horror. One moment they had been happy in their freedom and in the decision which had just been taken, to lay all the facts before Brand; the next, they found themselves in dire peril, so unexpectedly that the rapidity of events had momentarily nonplussed them.

Alan could do nothing but stare at the lanky form of the Sinister Individual, clothed as usual in a dark suit, a black top coat thrown over one arm, with a black, soft hat placed rakishly on his head, the brim well down, shading the sallow face. But in a few seconds he found himself once more in full possession of his faculties and able to speak—but there seemed to be nothing worth while saying. Staring into the barrel of the vicious automatic which remained pointing at his heart, Alan suddenly realised that he was no longer afraid. With the evaporation of his surprise had come a curious calm. There was so obviously nothing to be done—they had been completely trapped and all that remained was to await developments. Presently their captor spoke again.

"This is a lonely part of the road," he said. "I thank you for the thoughtfulness displayed in leav-

ing your aëroplane in such a position. But lonely as it is, the scene which we should present to a casual observer at the moment is one which, I am afraid, would be bound to excite his interest. I do not desire to excite anybody's curiosity or suspicion for the present. You, madam, will kindly walk straight forward to the road. Understand that in the position in which I am placed I can shoot you down, and shall shoot you down without the slightest compunction, if you deviate in any way from the straight path. As for you, sir, you will kindly wait here with me."

So saying, he pulled his top coat over his arm so that only the point of the barrel of his automatic was showing, and jerked his head in the direction of the road.

Jessica glanced at Alan, and a little thrill of admiration passed through him as he saw her flushed face and the angry shining of her deep, blue eyes. Then for one second he was fearful for her safety, fearful that she would refuse to be browbeaten in this manner and would leap like a tigress on the man tormenting them. But wiser counsels evidently prevailed in her mind, and with an imperious toss of her head she started off in the direction of the road. Alan watched her.

"A pretty lady," said the Sinister Individual, musingly. "A little young, perhaps, but still when I have done with her she will be useful to add to my collection."

He lapsed into silence and Alan watched the astonishing scene with bated breath. A strange sense of excitement had come over him. He could not understand what this man was driving at in send-

ing Jessica off alone on a journey which, when she had traversed a few more yards, was bound to lead her out of his sight: he felt within him a faint hope.

But he was to be quickly disillusioned from any idea that she might escape, for just as Jessica approached the hedge which concealed the road, a ruffianly-looking man stepped out and seized her by the arm. Alan heard her utter a little shriek, and simultaneously there came from the figure beside him a curiously repellent chuckle seeming to come from deep down in his throat. Jessica was dragged through the hedge out of his sight.

"Good!" remarked the Sinister Individual. "That chauffeur has evidently been dealt with. You will be interested to hear, perhaps, that the lady is in no immediate danger, providing that she behaves herself. She will be placed in her car, under some discomfort possibly from the gag and bonds which are at this moment being placed on her. She will be driven to my home. Since you have come to know her perhaps you have realised that she is not my daughter." He laughed, a laugh so mirthless that it sent a shudder of horror through the listening Alan. "It will take them some time in that car. Personally I am in a greater hurry. I have decided that you will conduct me in your aëroplane. There's quite a comfortable field for landing not so far from the house."

Again a feeling of hope came to Alan. If it were really this man's intention to trust himself to Alan's pilotage of the machine in the air, then surely it should be possible for him to fake some forced landing in some crowded locality and thus prevent his captor from reaching his objective. But once

more the Sinister Individual's laugh, mirthless and merciless, broke in upon his thoughts.

"You are thinking, no doubt, that I am particularly foolish to trust myself in your machine when you are in charge. I don't think I am, my friend. I shall occupy the rear seat: I shall have this automatic in my hand pointing at your back. If necessary I shall not hesitate to shoot. I don't think it will be necessary, however. Just listen for a moment." He chuckled again. "My men have instructions to put that charming young lady, whom you have seen move rather rapidly through that hedge, to a most peculiarly painful and not very sudden death, in the event of my failing to reach home before them. You will see that it is important to you to get me there without an accident and without any forced landing. Ah! I see you were thinking of just such a possibility. Well, it's as you like. Personally I am not so fond of life that I mind going out at any moment, but I imagine that you are rather fonder of your life than to risk such a thing, because it would certainly mean your instant death and, as I say, not too pleasant a death for your fair companion. I think, therefore, that I am fairly safe in trusting myself to you. Am I right?"

He waited for an instant, smiling all the time that unpleasant, loathsome smile which Alan had already learnt to hate.

"Am I right?"

The words rang out imperatively, demanding an answer. Alan looked at his tormentor.

"Yes—blast you!" he cried suddenly.

"Ah! I thought I was. No need to use strong

language, however; let us at least be polite with each other. You will find that it is diplomatic to be polite with me." He smiled. "The mechanic who removed the plugs from your engine will be here in a moment. Ah! I see him coming already to replace them. He is my chauffeur. It will not take him long and I see that you have filled up with petrol. We have a journey of not much more than sixty miles to go. I have marked the route on this little map. Are you good at reading maps?"

"Not so bad," growled Alan.

"I hope you are," went on the figure in black, with a sudden change of voice. "I hope you are. You know it makes a great difference to the future of your young lady friend, but I won't stress the point. I have told you that before."

He advanced on Alan and presented him with a roughly drawn map, evidently taken from a road map, and the youth realised that there was no chance of wilfully missing the way. It was as clear as daylight. Two big towns, the direction to both of which Alan knew perfectly well, had to be passed over. A few miles beyond and there was marked a cross on the map. He saw it would be impossible to miss the landing place.

"One reason why I am making you take me by air," remarked the Sinister Individual, "is that I should hate to think your beautiful aëroplane should be left out for the night. Another, perhaps slightly more important, is that should I leave it there would be some clue to your whereabouts. I could not destroy it entirely: I must, therefore, make use of it. Why not? An aëroplane is always a useful thing

about the house. Come! Let us busy ourselves with the preparations for the start."

A man had approached across the field from the hedge, a man in chauffeur's uniform, and he was busying himself with Araminta's engine. He stepped back suddenly and announced in a gruff voice that all was ready. Alan, glancing quickly at it, realised he had spoken the truth, for the plugs were back in their places and the machine was ready for flight.

"You have your instructions, Franklin," said the Sinister Individual. "You know exactly what to do with the young lady in the event of my being delayed, don't you?"

"I do," answered the man.

"Thank you. You may start."

The man stood back, Alan swung the propeller, jumped into his seat, and a minute later Araminta rose clear of the fields in ready answer to the controls. As Alan gained height he glanced round at the road and saw that the great yellow car was moving off, closely followed by a smaller, enclosed car painted some dark colour. His heart sank within him. He knew now, even if he had suspected differently before, that the Sinister Individual had spoken truly. Inside that yellow car Jessica lay bound hand and foot, gagged, completely in the power, as he was also, of the dread creature sitting just behind him. Alan decided that there was nothing to be done but to obey the instructions which he had received, and looking again at the small map with which he had been provided, he took his bearings. Pointing Araminta's nose in the desired direction and having attained an adequate height,

he set himself to the task of controlling her playfulness. But she was particularly placid. Alan would almost have welcomed some of her little idiosyncrasies to combat in order that he might have something to fill his thoughts and keep them from dwelling on the terrible disappointment of the moment. But Araminta refused to oblige. She flew along perfectly, giving no trouble, and Alan had only too much time in which to consider the fearful situation in which he found himself. They had seemed so near their goal—the arrest of this monstrous villain. All that had appeared necessary was an immediate interview with Brand, at which all the mysteries as to Jessica's part in the affair would be cleared up, and with her help authority furnished with a sufficiency of clues to effect the capture. So near to this—and also, for Alan, so near to a friendship with this lovely lady—a friendship which eventually might have led . . . But it was useless to think of such things. They were both prisoners under the most ruthless of men. For a moment a wave of acute anger overcame him at the ease with which they had fallen into this impasse. Everything had been done so quickly, the capture had been so neat and effective that he had scarcely realised it all. They had been on the verge of a great step forward in the mystery of this strange monster now seated behind him; and now instead of that one step forward they were a whole flight of steps behind. Jessica and he were the only two who had an inkling of the truth beyond the bare facts which were in Brand's possession, and they were

both now definitely out of action, at any rate for the time being.

A following wind which sprang up as the evening drew in enabled Araminta to attain a good speed, and they passed over the second town marked on the map in well under the hour. Alan began to look about him for the house marked with a cross which could be only a few miles distant now. He found it lamentably easy to pick out. It was the only house for miles, a farmhouse, or so it appeared to be. Turning around, Alan pointed at it questioningly. The Sinister Individual, crouching in his seat, nodded in assent.

Alan thereupon discerned the field to which his passenger had evidently referred, for it was large and flat, presenting an excellent surface on which to land. Then to his dismay he saw that there were several little figures waiting about, undoubtedly some of this villain's gang, ready for their arrival. He circled once round the field in order to become acquainted with it, and then pointed Araminta's nose into the wind and effected a neat landing.

As the machine came to rest four men ran up, as evil-looking a lot as Alan had ever seen. They helped the Sinister Individual from his seat, and as Alan alighted he felt himself seized by his arms at either side.

"Thank you," came the suave voice of his uninvited passenger. "A most exhilarating experience. Delightfully smooth flight. May I congratulate you, sir; you certainly know how to control an aëroplane most admirably. Please don't be anxious as to

the safety of your machine; she will be well looked after, I can assure you. Not that you will have much more use for her, I am afraid."

He laughed shortly, and as he did so and the full meaning of his words dawned on Alan, the youth felt in spite of himself a shudder of apprehension run through him. But he had no further time for thought. He was suddenly seized from behind and a cloth placed over his eyes and tied at the back of his head. Other hands pulled his arms roughly together behind him and tied them tightly, his feet only being left free. The Sinister Individual laughed again.

"My young friend," he said, "if you had any hopes that I might really make you fly to my abode you were quite wrong. The possibility, I agree, is unlikely; but impossibilities sometimes do occur, and you might escape. If you did, well, you could tell your friend Detective-Inspector Brand, did you reach him, precisely where I keep my little lair. Oh, no, not so easy as all that, my friend." He paused. "We are now going for a little motor drive, and as I think you must realise by now, you will not be able to see where we are going; but let me tell you, so that you will not be curious. We are going to my home, my real home. We are going there in order that I may keep you as my guest for a little while, just as long as it suits me. Once there you will be quite safe, quite nicely looked after for a time. We will meet a little later this afternoon. For the moment I have work to do."

He had evidently made some sign to his servants, for Alan felt himself suddenly pushed forward by a

man on either side. No word was spoken, although the walk took some few minutes; and as they stopped once for a gate to be opened, Alan realised that they had left the field in which he had landed. Suddenly the sound of the running engine of a car came to his ears. He was stopped abruptly and somebody growled at him.

"Two steps up; get a move on!"

He was pushed into a car and onto a seat and almost in the same moment he felt his feet pulled together and some substance, which he imagined to be rope, wound tightly around them. He knew he was now quite helpless.

For an hour or more, as well as Alan could judge, that car traversed the roads. At last, however, they pulled up and he felt himself half-jostled, half-carried into a house. He was taken down a flight of stairs and heard a door open. Then his bonds were taken from him, but for a few moments he could see nothing in the brilliance of artificial light, his eyes being unaccustomed to the glare. But as clear sight came back to him he found that he was standing at the door of a cellar and that three men, even more villainous-looking than those he had seen in the field, were regarding him closely.

"Yes," said one. "Yes, mister, a cellar for you. Not a bad one, though. Can't think why the boss takes such care of his guests."

He laughed cruelly, gave Alan a push, and closed the door. Alan heard a key turn in the lock.

CHAPTER XIV

ALAN found himself in darkness. His first action was to feel for matches, and he discovered to his relief that he had practically a full box in his coat pocket. He struck one and held it above his head, the better to see in what sort of prison he had been secreted. It was evidently a disused cellar with bare walls and an old rug covering the stone floor. A wooden table stood in the centre of the room with a wooden chair beside it, otherwise the place seemed devoid of furniture.

He moved about, examining the walls. As he approached one corner he tripped over some object lying on the floor and jumped back, momentarily startled. Lighting another match he found that he had stumbled over a mattress.

"Ah!" said Alan to himself. "Bed-sitting-room, I see."

Then suddenly an idea struck him. He looked at his wrist watch and noticed that it was just after half-past six. As far as he could judge his drive in the car had lasted for an hour or thereabouts, and this tallied with his idea about the time when he had landed in Araminta with the Sinister Individual. He estimated, from the speed at which the car had driven at the time, that he was at some place an

hour or so distant, about thirty miles, from the spot where he had landed.

"It may be useful," thought Alan. "One never knows. If I ever get out of here Brand may be thankful for that piece of information."

He continued the examination of the room, but there was nothing else to discover excepting that high up on one wall there was a grating, through which a very little fresh air was able to enter within the four dank walls.

Alan let his third match drop to the floor and stamped on it. There was no need to waste the small supply he possessed, and suddenly another idea came to him, upon which he immediately acted. He took the major portion of wax vestas from the box in his pocket and concealed them under the mattress which was obviously intended for him.

"If they take my box from me now," he thought, "it won't matter so much. I shall still have a little illumination."

Then groping his way to the table he sat down on the chair, composing himself to be as patient as possible until something fresh should happen. He must have fallen asleep, for it was some time later when he awoke with a start, to find that a key had been turned in the lock and that the door was open.

Two men entered; the first holding an automatic which he ostentatiously waved about, the second bearing a tray on which Alan could see some welcome food. The man placed it before him and then withdrew. His companion suddenly spoke.

"When you have done with that," he said, "bang on your door. We'll come and take it away."

With that he advanced to the table and set on it a candle which he had been carrying in his left hand; he then removed himself, locking the door behind him.

Alan looked at the food which had been put before him. There was a large plate of cold beef cut into small squares, two slices of bread plentifully, even lavishly, buttered, and a large glass of beer, but Alan noticed, with an inward smile, that there was no sign of knife, fork, or spoon. His captor was plainly taking no chances with his prisoner. But the meal was a good one, far better than Alan had anticipated in the circumstances, and he set to with alacrity. When he had finished he felt for his cigarette case, finding, to his great joy, that he had three cigarettes left. One of these he lit, but refrained from banging on the door according to instructions, until he had completed his smoke. He then moved over to it and rapped loudly.

Almost immediately he heard the key turn in the lock and the two men reappeared. The second lifted the tray and candle and went out, while the other, standing at the door, turned to him before closing it.

"The boss says he'll want you later."

Once more he heard the door closed and made secure. Alan sat down again, striving to remain cheerful—but it was difficult. His thoughts kept wandering to Jessica, wondering what had happened to her and whether she were imprisoned in a like manner in that house. All of a sudden it occurred to him that she might conceivably be somewhere near, and he made another search round the walls, tapping here and there, and listening intently for an

answering sound. But the quest was fruitless. There came no response whatsoever. Where was she? Had she perhaps been taken elsewhere to some other den of this powerful fiend, or had she . . . But he dared not continue this line of thought, dared not for one moment admit the possibility of her having already fallen a victim to his violence. That so much beauty, such gallant youth should be destroyed, wasted, merely to gratify this monster's thirst for blood was too horrible, too inhuman to contemplate. It was incredible, too fantastic for his mind to dwell on for a moment: yet he could not rid his thoughts of the Sinister Individual's character as portrayed by Brand.

He resigned himself to the inevitable and returned to his seat. He hoped against hope that she was hidden somewhere like him, awaiting what further developments might arise. But what reason could the Sinister Individual have for keeping him a prisoner here? Why had he not just got rid of him in cold blood in that field? What use could Alan possibly be to him? These and a thousand other queries rushed through his mind, but he could find no answer to them.

Suddenly from the turmoil of his thoughts Alan became instantly alert. He had heard footsteps approaching the door of the cellar, and a moment later he heard a key turn in the lock. The door was flung open and his warder, still brandishing the massive automatic, signed to him to leave his prison.

"No monkey tricks, mind," he said as Alan passed him. "Do exactly as I tell you. I have been given a free hand by the boss and if you show any signs of

trouble I shall plug you in the back. Don't forget it."

As if to emphasize his words the man pushed the muzzle of his automatic into the small of Alan's back.

"Straight on!" he said. "Straight on and down that passage."

The passage was barely light, which Alan realised was just as well, for had he come straight out from the darkness to a brilliant glare he might have found it difficult to obey the man's instructions. He preceded him to the end of the passage, where he found a flight of stairs facing him.

"Up!" ordered the man behind him.

Up he went, with that muzzle always sticking into his back to remind him of his powerlessness, but in truth Alan had no desire to do anything other than what he was bidden.

At the top of the stairs Alan found himself in a spacious hall, sumptuously furnished in Eastern style. His feet sank into the thickness of a deep blue Persian carpet. The walls were panelled in black oak and entirely devoid of pictures, but a plate rack placed just below the ceiling was laden with valuable Chinese plates, their marvellous colours contrasting strikingly with the black walls. Blue silk curtains hung at the windows, while several divans in orange and blue velvet were arranged about the room, decked with cushions. A great lacquer screen stood near the fireplace, wherein a bright log fire was casting a cheerful blaze. On a little black table reposed an enormous blue vase filled with daffodils.

Alan was amazed at the great luxury and taste displayed.

"Straight across to that door opposite," said the man.

Alan walked across.

"Knock."

Alan knocked.

A voice, the voice which Alan recognised as the suave tones of the Sinister Individual, bade him enter. He opened the door and stepped forward.

A strange sight met his eyes. The Sinister Individual was standing with his back to the fireplace, facing the door, a great wolf hound lying curled up at his feet. On his left, reposing in an armchair, apparently perfectly at her ease, was Jessica. On his right stood another armchair, vacant.

"Ah!" came the loathed voice. "Here comes our friend. Pray take a seat, sir."

He waved his hand towards the empty chair. Alan moved forward, his eyes all the while on Jessica, striving to understand what lay behind her expression. Her face was very pale and set, lips drawn tightly together, her eyes unfathomable. She gave the impression of being intensely tired and miserable but perfectly calm and resigned. She looked, in fact, as though she were prepared to face the worst that might befall—with small hope of escaping it.

Alan walked to the chair and sat down. As he did so a leather strap was passed across his chest and fastened at the back by the man who had escorted him to the room.

"Thank you, Bert," remarked the Sinister Individual. "You may now leave us."

As soon as the door had closed behind his satellite, he turned to Alan.

"It is quite possible," he said, "for you to get out of the strap which is holding you to that chair. The feat, however, will take you some little time, and at your slightest movement I shall be forced to assume that you are meditating some violence upon my person. This I shall resent to the extent of at least one automatic bullet, so I suggest that you sit there quite quietly in the sensible manner in which our fair friend so near you is sitting."

Alan glanced at Jessica and saw that she also was fastened to her chair in a like manner to himself.

"I trust you are quite comfortable in your quarters? That you had an adequate dinner?"

Alan looked up and realised he was being spoken to.

"Plain but good," he answered shortly.

"Splendid! I regret the necessity of making you eat with your fingers," went on his captor, "but you see knives, even forks, can be unpleasant weapons. I have to protect my men."

"I quite understand," said Alan.

"I thought you would. You have always appeared to me to be a sensible fellow. Save once—when you left your aëroplane in that field. You are wondering, perhaps, how I managed to set my little trap for you—how I happened to be on the spot, eh? Well, my dear friend, I will tell you. It is so amusing! I saw our fair lady here in London early in the day in that very brightly coloured car—slightly lacking in taste, I consider, but most useful if one desires to follow it. I did follow and I saw what

occurred. Our young pilot's manœuvres, his mishap, his request for petrol—and his spectacular leap onto the back of the car. And then I waited." He rubbed his hands together, a smile of infinite self-complacency on his face. "I waited until you returned. For I knew you would return to pick up your aëroplane. I made due preparations and you fell into the trap."

The man relapsed into a gloating silence. Alan glanced about him at the luxurious room with its heavy curtains, thick carpet, and cheerful fire blazing behind his sinister jailer, and he could not believe that he and the girl sitting so near to him, and yet out of reach, could really be in such dire peril. Such a very short time ago he had been free, a man whose actions were dictated by his own will only; but now he could do nothing that did not accord with the desire of this man before him. He had to obey his every whim, his every command. Alan closed his eyes for a moment in order to give the lie to what all his senses, his brain, his eyes, his reason forced him to acknowledge. But opening them again he saw once more the vile figure of this saturnine creature whom he now loathed and hated standing by the fire staring musingly into space. It was true; all was true, unbelievable though it might be: Jessica and he were held tightly clenched in the talons of this arch criminal. He moved uneasily in his chair, and as he did so the sharp voice of his captor rang out.

"You have not forgotten the little warning that I gave you?" he said, the caricature of a smile slowly spreading over his features. "No, no. It would be inadvisable to forget that. Kindly sit quite still."

Once more he relapsed into silence. Alan, to whom the wisdom of implicit obedience to this man's commands commended itself, remained motionless, allowing himself one quick glance towards Jessica. She smiled at him, a small, sad smile.

Suddenly the Sinister Individual spoke, but his voice was now entirely different, unlike those suave tones which Alan had grown accustomed to expect.

"How much do you know?" he rapped out.

There seemed to be a fire in his eyes as he stared first at one and then the other of them, and he seemed even more sallow than before. Alan felt a sensation, a sort of prescience almost, of evil to come, which chilled him with apprehension. He shivered slightly.

"How much do you know?" repeated the Sinister Individual.

Alan realised that he was being addressed. He sat up a little, the change of position alleviating the cramp which was beginning to ache in his limbs.

"How much do I know?" he answered. "Oh, a fair amount. Why?"

The Sinister Individual scowled at him.

"I have stood a lot from you, my friend," he said. "I have stood far more than I intended to. I have given you a great latitude of speech, but kindly understand that from now onwards I am the master. It is impolitic to anger me."

"Yes," said Alan, meekly.

"Very well, then. How much do you know?"

Suddenly Jessica spoke; Alan was full of admiration for her courage.

"Between us," she said, "we know practically the lot, I think."

The Sinister Individual removed his glare from Alan to deflect it upon the unfortunate girl. For a moment or two he did not speak; then very quietly, his words so low that Alan had to strain to catch them, he continued:

"Practically the lot, you think. Everything, eh? I wonder."

For a moment he paused; then the words came softly, one after the other very rapidly as the man became worked up. Alan divined that he was talking not so much to them as to himself, that he was reviewing a period of his life, and although it was of such paramount interest to him, yet Alan felt that he ought not to be there listening to what seemed to be a confession. Then in a flash he guessed that this man before him, torturing them, was not merely a great criminal but was, indeed, something even more dangerous—an undoubted lunatic! He shuddered, feeling that there was something unwholesome, something distinctly morbid about the scene; the two of them sitting there listening to these passionate outpourings of a warped brain. The man's voice ran on and on unhesitatingly, until, fascinated by the sound, Alan became absorbed, rapt in astounded horror.

"How long ago is it now, my dear, since you left me? Nearly twenty years. On the night of our wedding, on our marriage night. You went up to change for dinner, you never came down. I went to look for you. You were not in your room. You left the house that night." For a long time he remained

motionless staring straight in front of him, his eyes suspiciously humid. But then abruptly his passion overcame him. "God!" he cried. "How I laughed, laughed that I should have been fooled by you, a mite of a girl. You had married me for the money you'd made me settle on you, had you? You'd never loved me! You took great pains to point that out in your note, didn't you? You took great pains to show me I had made it possible for you to go to the man you loved. Penniless, was he? So penniless that he couldn't support you, and my money was to support you both." He laughed dully. "Did I allow it? Yes, for a year or two. I let you fall into a feeling of false security. I let you begin to think that I had accepted your verdict, that I was the fool you thought me. And then when you were happy with him what did I do? I came in the middle of the night when your 'husband'—as you called him—was away, I came and I confronted you with that note. No one saw me come, no one knew I had been there, but when they came the following morning what did they find? They found your mutilated body on that bed, the blood which had gushed from your wounds soaking the bedclothes. Did anyone suspect it was I? Not a soul! Did anyone know I had been anywhere near you? Not a soul excepting the one who I took good care did know. And what did he do, the weak-kneed fool? I told him it was I. I defied him to go to the police and tell them what he knew. He took the easier way out. He killed himself. His death was pleasant compared to yours."

The man ceased speaking and Alan glanced at Jessica. Very pale, sitting as upright as the strap

around her slender body would allow, she was staring at their captor in horror, hanging on his words. Alan felt physically sick. The man seemed to gloat on the lurid details of this frightful crime he had committed, but in spite of his repellence Alan could not but feel a wave of pity for him. Surely if ever a crime had been instigated by the victim this was one! He had no further time for thought, for once more the words were flowing from the man's lips.

"And you were only one of many. Who has been man's greatest enemy at all times in this world? Who has made him do all the shady things which have been written down to his account? Who has been behind him in every crime that has been committed? *Woman!* You alone were not enough for my vengeance. I was just one of many poor fellows who had been deceived, but I set myself to prevent as many others as possible of my sex being likewise deceived. You with your pretty ways, your dainty faces, lovely lips and eyes—sweet without and black as hell within! With your soft hands luring men on to destruction, putrifying their bodies, killing their souls to gratify your vanity! Like Dead Sea fruit—all beauty and corruption. Useless parasites, devilish sirens, harpies, Jezebels—but I vowed to exterminate the lot. To help other poor fools by ridding the world of such vile contamination! And I am succeeding!"

For the first time since he had commenced his amazing story, the Sinister Individual suddenly seemed aware of the presence of his two prisoners. He glared at Jessica, a wealth of hatred in his eyes; then, turning to Alan, stared at him with equal loath-

ing, causing him to shudder involuntarily. Abruptly, their captor rang the bell behind him. Two men instantly appeared and, on a sign from their leader, released the bonds shackling Alan and Jessica. The man behind Alan pressed something hard into his back, which he realised was the muzzle of an automatic. Pushing him before him the man forced Alan to go out of the room by a side door. Alan felt the cool night air refreshing his brow as he was forced along a paved garden path. A high wall faced him not twenty yards away. The door of this was guarded by an armed man, and as Alan approached it was thrown open, allowing him to pass through.

He was in a small enclosed space, with high walls all round. In the gloom Alan could, at first, make out little, but as things became clearer and his eyes accustomed to the darkness, he saw that there were mounds, ominous-looking mounds in rows on either side of him. He felt Jessica suddenly approach beside him, and a moment later heard the voice of the Sinister Individual from behind.

"You wonder what these are? Let me tell you. It is here that I keep my little collection of those who have paid with their lives for their physical attraction. It is here that I keep my little collection of likely sources of trouble to man. Under each of those mounds there lies what remains now of an attractive woman."

Alan swayed. A terrible feeling of despair overcame him as he realised the full meaning of these foul words. There could be no question that this man was mad. What place was it in which they were? A cemetery? As Alan looked about him he

understood the full significance of those little mounds in rows all around him.

And with this realisation there dawned on him the full horror of Jessica's position in that house. The words which the Sinister Individual had spoken to him that very afternoon rang in his ears. "A pretty lady, a little young, perhaps, but still when I have done with her she will be useful to add to my collection."

Was Jessica to be made the latest addition to this ghastly cemetery?

And as this awful thought struck Alan with a force which no amount of reasoning would dispel, suddenly from just behind there came a sound which paralysed his already over-strung nerves, filling him with ungovernable fear—a long-drawn, blood-curdling wail followed by a ghoulish howl, unearthly and diabolic in the silence of the night. Alan recovered himself sufficiently to realise that the great dog which he had seen sleeping before the fire must have accompanied his master, and thus entered into the gruesome spirit of this unhallowed place, but abruptly came another sound, a low, mirthless chuckle from the Sinister Individual, which made the cold sweat of fear break out upon his forehead. He could not move, he scarcely dared to breathe, he remained as if turned to rock, awaiting a repetition of those two uncanny sounds, the inhuman howl and that equally inhuman chuckle.

CHAPTER XV

ANDREW BURNS stood outside the hangar, gazing skywards. The evening was drawing in; the sun, already very low, was rapidly approaching the horizon and would soon disappear. Shadows were lengthening, and, as if in sympathy Andrew's frown, the frown which had been almost ever-present on his forehead for the last hour, seemed to overcast his face. Suddenly he turned sharply to the nervous mechanic standing beside him, and for about the twentieth time that evening rapped out his question:

"Mr. Squire didn't say where he was going?"

"No, sir. Said nothing at all. He came rushing up from the gates and yelled at us to get the machine ready. It was not five minutes after that that he was off the ground."

"And he went in the direction of Staines, you say?"

"Disappeared in that direction, sir."

Andrew remained silent. The affair was most peculiar: what on earth had induced Alan so suddenly to change his mind? Andrew knew his pupil had intended to fly that morning and would return to London for lunch. He had seen him descend to the aërodrome and had assumed that he had left for London, since when he had himself come down not so very much later Alan had gone from the

aërodrome and Araminta had been in the mechanics' hands standing beside the hangar almost in the very position in which Andrew stood at that moment. He had gone to the club house for a drink and a wash and on returning had seen no sign of Araminta, but it was not until much later in the afternoon that a nervous mechanic had come and told him the story. Before, he had assumed that the machine had been replaced in its hangar.

"What the devil can the young ass be doing?"

Andrew had not intended his words for other ears, but he had spoken aloud and the mechanic answered him.

"He's very good in the air, sir. One of your best pupils, if I may say so, and the machine was in excellent condition—that I can vouch for."

"It does seem extraordinary. Didn't he give any explanation at all?" asked Andrew suddenly.

"No, sir. He looked rather flushed and very excited. He was in a desperate hurry, sir."

"If he doesn't come back soon," said Andrew, musingly, "he'll have to land by artificial light and he's never done that before. Damn it! I don't like it."

A wave of resentment came over him that his friend should be so thoughtless in leaving him with this anxiety as to his safety.

"The young fellow's probably gone off to visit some girl," he said to himself. "Silly ass! Why the devil couldn't he let me know? The machine's probably in a garage at the moment and that idiot Alan sitting with his lass. God bless my soul!"

The exclamation came out suddenly, involuntarily.

An idea had struck him with the force of a blow between the eyes. The word "lass" had brought it to his mind.

Deep blue eyes, rose-leaf cheeks . . . He turned to the mechanic almost violently.

"Very excited, did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Flushed?"

"Yes, sir."

The mechanic shifted his feet awkwardly.

"He hadn't been drinking, if that's what you mean, sir. There wasn't much time for that. He had only been gone from the aërodrome about ten minutes. He left his car at the gates with the engine still running. It was found half an hour later and put into the parking ground."

Andrew laughed.

"I didn't think he'd been drinking," he said, shortly. "I thought—well, something else. You'd better wait around for a bit in case Mr. Squire comes back to-night."

"Yes, sir."

Andrew turned on his heel and walked quickly to the club house. The idea which had come to him seemed to fit with the few facts that were in his possession. The hurry, the excitement, the flushed face, all appeared to fit in with the possibility that Alan had caught sight of *the* lass.

"Heaven help us!" said Andrew to himself. "It's these Jessicas who make the world go round, but Heaven help us all the same. I wonder if the lad has caught a glimpse of her?"

Even as he reached the door of the club house he

heard running feet behind him, and turning saw the mechanic rapidly approaching. He waited for him and the man came up panting.

"Excuse me, sir," he cried, "I've just had an idea."

"Well? What is it?"

"Petrol, sir. He never filled up, sir, and he was flying for three hours this morning. There can't have been much left in the tank: enough for about an hour, that's all."

"Good God!" cried Andrew.

For a moment he hesitated, all thought of Jessica gone from his mind. Could it be that Alan had been forced to descend suddenly in some locality where no possible landing ground was available? Could it be that the youth had crashed and was even now lying in a tangled mass of wreckage which had once been Araminta? Andrew shuddered, and then pulled himself together.

"Stuff and nonsense!" he said to himself. "Now don't get alarmed. Somebody would almost certainly have rung us up if that had happened. Anyway, a spot of telephoning wouldn't do any harm."

Andrew ran up to the top of the building, to the control room. A few words with the official in charge convinced him that no communications had come in with regard to any stranded aëroplane that afternoon.

"Damn it, that's odd!" thought Andrew. "No petrol, no flight. Master Alan must have come down. Perhaps he made a successful forced landing and got some petrol, but if so, where the devil is he now? Unfeeling brute! He might have let me know."

He walked slowly down again to the mess room and prepared himself a drink. That at least seemed sensible: it was, in fact, about the only thing to do. He lit a cigarette and looked out of the window. The light was fading fast: any machine now in the air would almost certainly require that the aërodrome be flooded with artificial light before it could make a safe descent. Andrew frowned: Alan was liable to get himself into trouble with the authorities of the aërodrome if he came back that evening and caused the consequent trouble and expense of lighting up. If he came back . . . Once more a vision came to Andrew of Jessica on the one occasion on which he had seen her. Two deep blue eyes, a radiant skin lightly tipped with freckles, the wavy tendrils of her hair, her rosy mouth—but especially the glorious deep blue eyes. And again he thought of Alan as the mechanic had described him: rushing madly across the aërodrome shouting for the machine to be made ready to fly, flushed, very excited. Andrew suddenly struck his knee as he resolved upon a course of action.

"Dang it," he said to himself. "It's possible, it's plausible even."

He went out of the room quickly and made his way to the telephone. In a few minutes he was connected with Scotland Yard.

"Detective-Inspector Brand, please."

"Yes, sir. Who's speaking?"

"Captain Burns."

"Right, sir. One minute."

Andrew waited as patiently as he could for the few seconds which Brand took to come to the tele-

phone; suddenly he heard a cheerful voice on the other end of the wire.

"Hullo! That Captain Burns?"

"Hullo! That you, Brand? Look here, young Alan Squire has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. Please listen a minute."

In a few words Andrew explained all that he knew of the sudden and mysterious disappearance of Alan and Araminta. Then he gave his own deductions rapidly.

"He was excited. The mechanic said he was flushed. He was in a desperate hurry, anyway. It's quite possible that he saw the girl—Jessica, I mean. Say she was in a car faster than his own: since that sports car which he had was crashed up by his strange visitor he has hired a little car and almost any decent car could have outpaced him. Suppose he caught sight of her on the road, I say, don't you think it's possible that he thought of Araminta? You know what I mean by Araminta, don't you?"

"H'm!" said Brand. "And he hasn't come back yet?"

"Not a sign, though if he does now there'll be a hell of a row."

"Why?"

"Lights," replied Andrew. "Can't get down without lights."

"I see," said Brand.

For a moment there was silence on the other end of the wire, then Andrew heard the inspector's voice again.

"Last time I was at your aërodrome I remember

good beer. Very good beer. Supposing I pop round again, would there be any more?"

Andrew laughed.

"A barrel or two," he said.

"Right! I'll be along at once."

Andrew rang off and made his way back to the mess room. It was now quite dark, and he took up his unfinished drink which he had left on a table. Even as he did so a waiter approached and informed him that he was wanted on the telephone. He replaced the glass and went back to the telephone booth.

He found it was Inspector Brand who wished to speak to him. A moment later the detective's pleasant voice once more came over the wire.

"Hullo! Captain Burns?"

"Yes."

"Me again. Tell me, anything peculiar about Araminta?"

"Anything peculiar about Araminta? What do you mean?"

"Quaint shape? Curious colour?"

"Oh, I see," said Andrew quickly, "you mean anything by which she might be identified? Yes, as a matter of fact there is. She's Alan Squire's own property and consequently he could have her painted as he wished. She's perfectly white, with the name 'Araminta' on the fuselage just underneath the pilot's seat, has the usual figures, of course, but I'm afraid the ordinary passer-by wouldn't notice them. But there's one thing she has which they might notice —a red tail. That red tail is what you want to look for in the air."

"Red tail?"

"Yes."

"You said 'red tail'?"

"I did say red tail," answered Andrew impatiently.

"Glad you said red tail. Aircraft with a red tail found stranded in field near lonesome part of Portsmouth road."

"What!" cried Andrew. "You've found her?"

"No. I haven't."

"Oh, don't be a fool!" said Andrew, once more impatient. "I know *you* haven't, but somebody has?"

"No," said Brand, evenly. "Somebody hasn't. I said she was found, but she's gone again."

"What?"

"She's gone again. Disappeared. Farm hand passing along found her there. Nobody about. Went for assistance. Came back with assistance. Assistance useless. Aëroplane gone."

"Aëroplane gone?" repeated Andrew stupidly. The rapid sequence of events he found bewildering.

"Aëroplane quite gone," replied Brand. "No sign whatsoever. Assistance thought farm hand dippy, but from what you have told me he wasn't dippy. Situation of aëroplane as stated by farm hand just about where petrol would run out. That beer nearly ready?"

"Yes," said Andrew, shortly.

"Right! Blow the froth. I'll be along."

Andrew returned to the other room and this time was allowed to finish his refreshment in peace, but as he did so his mind was active with the new facts about which Brand had just informed him. To a

great extent he was relieved: that Araminta had been found apparently unharmed, for unharmed she must have been to rise into the air again, proved conclusively that the only thing which had happened was that the machine had run out of petrol. Alan had evidently effected a safe landing, had then managed in some way to replenish with fuel, and had taken Araminta up once more. But then what? Where had he gone? What had happened after that? As he came to these points in his deliberations the waiter once more approached and informed him that he was again required on the telephone.

With a muttered oath, for telephoning was not one of his favourite pastimes, Andrew returned to the booth.

"Hullo! That Captain Burns?"

"Yes," replied Andrew. "Is it Brand?"

"Still me. I say, reports flocking in in answer to broadcast to various police stations. Can't possibly leave here at the moment. Aëroplane with red tail seen flying fairly low over village near Salisbury. Sorry about your beer. Nothing wrong with mine. What about you coming here?"

"Right," said Andrew. "I'll get into the car and be with you as soon as possible."

"One moment. Can you fly an aëroplane at night?"

Andrew laughed.

"Can a canary sing?"

"I thought you could. Just have a machine ready, will you? The Yard will pay for it if necessary. May want you in it later."

"Right!" said Andrew.

"Good! Come as soon as you can."

"I shall come," said Andrew, "as fast as a seven-horse-power Austin can move. So long!"

But Brand had already left the telephone.

Andrew wasted no time. He reached the club house and gave instructions for a machine to be got ready in case of need. He then ran across to the parking ground, got out his little car, and set off at full speed from the aërodrome. It took him some little time to get to town: at that time of night the hundreds of City men who live outside London and travel to and fro by car were issuing in one great stream along all the roads. Andrew mustered all his courage and ability and took every available opportunity of cutting in. He made no record time, but in view of the difficulties did extremely well, and pulled up outside Scotland Yard rather sooner than he had expected.

Brand was waiting for him, and without a word pushed him into a seat, presenting him with a drink.

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

Brand held out a lighted match, and as soon as he saw that his guest was comfortable he smiled across at him.

"Hard and fast on the track," he said. "Thank God for that red tail! Helped enormously. Araminta located unharmed in field belonging to disused farmhouse."

"Found? I thought you said she had been lost again."

"So she was—and found again."

"Oh!" said Andrew. "I see. And what of Alan?"

"No sign."

Andrew's face fell.

"No sign at all? Nobody saw him?"

"Not a soul. Disused farmhouse two miles from any other habitation."

"Whereabouts?" asked Andrew.

"Near Salisbury."

"I see. Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Nothing much," said Brand shortly. "Except congratulations. Must have been Jessica he was after, otherwise whole escapade inconceivable. Whole thing very strange. Suggest that I'll be more useful on the spot than here. We'll just give the reports a little more time to come in, then if you don't mind I should like to be taken up to visit Araminta."

"There's only one thing," said Andrew, doubtfully. "I must know exactly where it is that you want to go to and let the nearest aërodrome know. I can't land you without very great risk anywhere but at a lit-up aërodrome at this time of night."

"Right!" said Brand. "Here's a map. Look! This is the spot."

Andrew frowned over it for a minute, then his brow cleared.

"That's all right," he said. "I can get you within a very few miles of it."

"Good!"

The conversation languished. The two were busy with their own thoughts, both seriously apprehensive as to what might have befallen Alan. But Andrew argued to himself that the lad could not have come to much harm in following Jessica. He believed a

great deal in instinctive impulses, and that one glance he had caught of Jessica had convinced him that she might be mysterious, but there was no harm in her. On the contrary, hers was a personality which attracted, and Andrew wondered if in reality he should not be envious of Alan at the moment.

CHAPTER XVI

"NERVOUS?" asked Andrew.

Brand fastened the last button of the leather overcoat which he had borrowed, and picked up the flying helmet Andrew had provided.

Before replying he looked out of the window of the club house at the brightly illuminated aërodrome. Then, turning towards his friend, he remarked with a smile: "Looks pretty, doesn't it?"

Andrew grinned.

"I am not surprised," he said. "Most people are nervous on their first flight at night time. I can tell you it looks much prettier from the air."

"Good!" said Brand.

Inwardly he was already regretting the decision to go by air, which he had made rather hastily.

"Blast you!" he reproached himself. "In almighty hurry, aren't you? Still this zeal is no bad thing. Similar impulses in past have got you where you are. I congratulate you, Inspector. Blast you, all the same!"

He looked round at Andrew.

"All ready, Captain," he said aloud.

"Good! A spot of Dutch courage before we go up?"

"I never drink anything," said Brand, ". . . except beer."

Andrew laughed. It took him only a few seconds to obtain the refreshment, and soon after Andrew led his friend out to the aërodrome.

The evening had turned slightly chilly; with the coming of night a fresh breeze had arisen, and as they approached they saw the machine which had been got ready for the flight, gleaming ghost-like in the glare of the arc lamps. They walked quickly up to it and Andrew saw Brand safely into the front seat before running his eye quickly over the aircraft. Then, climbing into the cock-pit, he gave the word. A mechanic swung the propeller and instantly a great roar came from the engine. Andrew opened the throttle once or twice, then, satisfied, gave the signal. The aëroplane taxied across the aërodrome into the wind, gathering speed with every moment, and suddenly the bumping of the wheels on the ground ceased—Brand realised he was in the air.

His feelings were very mixed. He knew that time was of paramount importance in all criminal investigation, and although there was as yet no indication that Alan and Araminta, to say nothing of Jessica, might have got themselves into trouble, the mysterious abandonment of the aëroplane seemed to bear a most ominous significance to Brand. During the short time in which they had been acquainted, he had formed a very sincere regard for Alan, and he could not deny that he was feeling distinctly anxious for his safety. He was, therefore, exceedingly pleased that he had decided upon the quickest method of reaching the heart of the pursuit, but despite this, as the cold air rushed past him, Brand could not repress a shiver of nervousness. Glancing over the

side, he was astonished to see how high they had climbed in the short time they had been flying. The lights of the aërodrome were far behind, the great field seemed a tiny spot below, and staring about he saw not so very far away that great conglomeration of pin-points of light which, grouped together, made a bright glow in the sky, and which he knew to be London.

Brand told himself that this was an experience he would not have missed for anything. In truth the sight of the English countryside from the air at night was rather wonderful, almost eerie, yet all the while the inspector had a sneaking feeling that the back seat of a powerful enclosed limousine tearing along the road might possibly have been considerably safer.

"I wish," he said to himself, "I was on the ground. Splendid zeal and all that. Won't take us long and so on." He looked over the side again. "Very pretty —but I wish I was on the ground."

He grinned to himself in the darkness. It seemed in some way to soothe his excited nerves, talking to himself. The roar of the engine in front, the rush of the wind, made it impossible for Andrew to hear him. He knew this quite well, yet he continued to talk to himself incessantly.

"Delightful. Most cooling. I should prefer to be hot on the ground! Splendid pilot! Magnificent record! Reliable machine passed by expert mechanics. But indubitably do I wish I was on the ground."

He paused for a moment, and then as Andrew

brought the machine round in a steady curve, banking steeply, he muttered softly:

"I do, really."

But that flight was very peaceful. Andrew had flown many times before in the darkness of the night. He could find his way, none better, as well by the instruments in front of him as by the use of his eyes in daylight, and the aëroplane made steady progress towards the aërodrome at Old Sarum, which was so convenient for their destination.

Actually, they were in the air some time, but to the excited Brand the flight seemed to be over almost as soon as it had begun. Just as he was becoming accustomed to the many new sensations which the flight involved, Andrew pushed the aëroplane's nose downwards and shut off his engine preparatory to making his glide into the brightly lit space which looked so tiny to Brand, and which he had not realised was that of the aërodrome at Old Sarum. The inspector's hair very nearly stood on end: for a moment it did not occur to him that Andrew had voluntarily turned off the engine; he thought that it had failed and that the machine was diving to destruction. Brand looked round quickly but was unable to see whether Andrew was busy with the controls or not, but he gradually realised that their angle of glide was a safe one.

"Blast you!" said Brand to himself once more. "No need for these warm clothes. Sensations make you quite hot enough. I wish I was on land. Shall be soon, thank God!"

The brilliantly illuminated aërodrome seemed to

be rushing up at them, with every moment becoming larger. The machine, answering to Andrew's dexterous fingers, came round in a curve and, missing hangars by some yards, inches it seemed to Brand, came to rest in the centre of the aërodrome. Andrew taxied round in a circle, bringing the aëroplane to a particularly brightly lit spot, which Brand saw was the mess room, and outside which stood a large car.

They wasted little time divesting themselves of overcoats and flying helmets, and then entered the car supplied by the local inspector of police in answer to a telephone request Brand had made prior to leaving London.

As they drove out of the aërodrome Brand introduced Andrew to Inspector Walker and then asked if there was any further news.

"Nothing new," said Walker. "There's the machine and she's been sitting there ever since we first found her. She's the one you are after, all right. Her name, 'Araminta,' is painted in red letters on the body."

Andrew caught his breath.

"How did you find her, Inspector?" he asked.

"Well, sir," answered the man, "in strict truth it wasn't us who found her. We got a telephone message from a farmer who said that one of his hands had come in and reported that a machine had been seen in a field which did not belong to his farm, although he had rented it from the next-door farmer when that fellow threw in his hand and gave up farming about six months before. The information was sufficiently odd for me to send a sergeant and

constable to have a look at it. There was the machine all right, abandoned evidently. Wasn't so very long after that, sir"—here he turned to Brand—"that we got a message through from the Yard inquiring after just such an aëroplane. You know the rest."

"Yes." Brand spoke sharply. "But there's nothing else? Nothing has happened since?"

"No, sir. Acting on your instructions, I posted a sergeant and two men near that field to lie hidden in case anybody should come back to the machine. There's been no news from them so I can only assume that nobody has come back."

"Dash!" said Brand. "Thought possible we might get somebody that way. Still there's plenty of time. Only may be cold vigil, Captain."

Andrew laughed.

"Anything," he said, "that may lead to the discovery of the whereabouts of Alan Squire I am prepared to put up with."

"And so am I!" said Brand, with feeling. "Well, Inspector," he turned to the local man, "where's this chauffeur taking us?"

"The station, sir."

"What for?" asked Brand.

"Well, sir," Inspector Walker smiled, "I thought you might be rather cold after your flight."

"A nice idea," said Brand, "but we are on duty now. No time to waste. Unless something happens to keep me down here I have got to be at the office early to-morrow morning. So I think the field. Don't you, Captain?"

Andrew nodded.

Inspector Walker leant over and redirected the chauffeur. It took them about twenty minutes to reach a spot where the car pulled up. Walker got out.

"You don't mind, sir?" he said to Brand. "I'd rather not take the car too near. We are about a quarter of a mile away, but if by any chance anyone is lurking about thinking of going back to that machine, we don't want to give away the fact that we are interested in it. I can lead you through fields to the spot where the sergeant is watching. That way we won't arouse curiosity."

Brand nodded curtly. The idea was obviously a good one. Walker set off in front, closely followed by Brand and Andrew. After a few minutes the local inspector turned to Brand and pointed towards a high hedge not far in front of them.

"In there, sir," he said in a whisper, "is the sergeant. I think we'd better go fairly softly."

"Right," agreed Brand.

They covered the remaining few yards very quietly, making no sound which might signal their approach, and came upon the sergeant lying in the hedge with his two constables.

"Any news?"

The sergeant rose to his feet and answered in a whisper.

"No, sir. Nobody's been near the machine."

Andrew suddenly caught Brand's arm.

"I say, old fellow," he said, "has anybody looked at Araminta?"

Brand stared at him in surprise.

"Looked at her? What do you mean?"

"Examined her, I mean. There may be something which I might deduce from the state of the engine or the fuselage which would give us some clue."

Brand turned to Inspector Walker.

"Anybody examined the aircraft?" he asked.

Walker looked blank.

"No, sir. I mean we had a look at it but it was empty."

Brand concealed a smile.

"The only thing," he said, turning to Andrew, "is that if anybody comes when you are examining it they will see the light and it will frighten them away."

"I shan't need any light," said Andrew. "I can feel with my fingers all that I shall want to know."

"Sure?"

"Well, pretty sure."

"Hm!"

Brand remained silent for a moment, brows knit deep in thought.

"It's a risk," he said suddenly. "Still one worth taking. If they come when you are looking at the machine we may lose a lot. If they don't and you find something we may gain a lot. Yes. I think you'd better do it. As few men as possible, though. Too many cooks make too much noise. You and I, Captain."

"Right," said Andrew.

Brand turned to the sergeant.

"Any way where we can get through this hedge without the whole countryside knowing?"

"Yes," replied the sergeant, "there's a hole here, sir. I've been looking through it."

"Right!" said Brand. "After you, Captain."

Andrew bent down and saw the hole of which the sergeant had spoken. It was just large enough to allow a man to scramble through without making much noise. Andrew succeeded and waited a moment on the other side until the lanky form of Brand joined him. Then the two tall, spare figures crept forward over the ground towards the dark shape which Andrew recognised as Araminta. They made no sound as they approached, keeping close to the ground in order to be as little visible as possible. Brand remained by the aircraft's nose on the lookout for any sudden attack, while Andrew straightened up and advanced quickly towards the cock-pit.

He ran his light fingers carefully over the controls. The night was not absolutely dark, although the sky was overcast, and it was not long before he had satisfied himself that as far as the machine was concerned Araminta was in perfect condition. Diving under the wing and reappearing on the other side, he made a quick survey of the engine. There again he could find no fault, although there was little he could do in the darkness. However, as he dived once more under the wing, making his way back towards the tail of the machine, Andrew felt prepared to bet a fairly substantial sum that Araminta was quite ready to be taken up into the air at that very moment.

The pilot was puzzled. There was nothing to make him suppose that Alan had made a forced descent into that field. Had he come down of his own volition he had chosen a curious place to land. There must have been some reason for it. But what?

Andrew's brow became furrowed in thought striving to solve the mystery. As he passed the passenger's cock-pit he suddenly stopped. He might as well learn all that Araminta had to tell him, and it seemed that here was a part of the machine which might conceivably yield some result upon examination. Alan had ascended from the aërodrome without a passenger that afternoon, and Andrew knew that the machine had been flown without a passenger for the last few days. It was possible that had Alan had a passenger on his last flight, the latter might have left some trace of his—or her—existence. A glove, a handkerchief, anything. Andrew found himself hoping that in this search Araminta would not fail him.

She did not. As Andrew's hands quickly brushed the seat his fingers came in contact with a slip of paper, neatly folded. He picked it up hastily and examined it, but in the absence of light could only perceive that it was a sheet of folded paper, with, he thought, some writing on it. Flushed with excitement, Andrew continued his search in the cock-pit but found nothing else out of the ordinary. He ran lightly to Araminta's scarlet tail and there found Brand crouching.

"Machine," reported Andrew, in a whisper, "in perfect condition. Araminta is eager to fly, I should say, but I have found something."

"Ah!"

The sound came almost as a long-drawn-out sigh. Brand was evidently impressed.

"What?"

"This," said Andrew, passing him the slip of paper. "I found it in the passenger's cock-pit. If you

remember, Alan Squire left the aërodrome alone."

The significance of his words was quickly understood by the inspector.

"Can't show a light here," he grumbled. "Have to take it to the hedge, probably farther, before we can read this. Come along, but remember more haste less speed. Similarly more haste more noise. We want speed without noise."

As silent as they had come the two crept back to the hedge which they had so recently left, and clambered once more through the hole.

Brand wasted little time. He gave instructions that the sergeant and two constables should remain until relieved, keeping watch on the machine. If any person approached he was at once to be arrested and brought to the station. Then with the local inspector the two men quickly retraced their steps. It was not until they were seated inside the car that Brand took out the slip of paper which Andrew had found. With the lanky pilot scanning it eagerly at the same time, Brand read the strange missive.

"My dear Brand," it began, *"I address this note to you since I assume that you will make yourself personally responsible for the search for your young friend Alan Squire. He is a guest in my house and for the moment is in no immediate danger. I say for the moment because his safety depends entirely on my mood, but I am not in the habit of destroying male specimens for my collection. On the other hand I rather fear that he knows too much: if he does then he must go. If he doesn't I shall wait until I am beyond your*

reach and then release him. But I would like to prevent a busy man from wasting his time: it is impossible for you, my friend, to find my home. All my skill and the work of years has gone towards making my lair inviolate. You had best, therefore, turn your attention to other cases."

The note was unsigned.

For a moment or two after having read it both Brand and Andrew remained silent. Then Andrew suddenly broke the silence.

"Damn it!" he said. "This fellow's blinking well got to be caught. He's a darn sight too conceited!"

"Agreed," said Brand, very quietly.

He did not speak again for a few moments. Andrew, watching him, realised that he was deep in thought and he did not like to disturb him. Then suddenly Brand looked up.

"I don't like this, Captain," he said briskly. "He expected the machine to be found. He left the note there on purpose for me. No one will come to claim it. I think that sergeant and his two men are losing their sleep unnecessarily."

The force of this argument also appealed to Andrew.

"Yes," he agreed. "It does look bad."

"Ominous, I call it," remarked the local inspector.

"Ominous," said Brand, "is the right word. It is a hopeless tangle. Look here, Inspector"—he turned to Walker—"I want you to send out your available men to all the farms and places you can think of all round that field. I want you to find out if anybody

saw the machine come down. I want you to find out more because I want everything that is known about that machine to be tabulated and ready for me in the morning. In the meantime"—he turned to Andrew—"I don't see that we are doing any good here, Captain. Sorry I made you take that flight for nothing."

"You didn't," said Andrew. "I found the note."

"That's true," said Brand. "Still I don't see we can do any more good down here. You can dismiss that sergeant." He turned again to the local inspector. "He is doing no good there. Just leave a man to look after the machine."

He remained silent for a moment or two.

"What about Araminta, Captain?" he asked. "Will she be all right in the field for the night?"

"Yes," said Andrew. "In this weather she can't come to any harm. I will come down in the morning and take her back to the aërodrome."

"Right! What about a little supper at the village police station and then home?"

Andrew rather reluctantly agreed, but he realised that there was nothing else that they could do. It was getting late and no further information was likely to turn up that night.

The chauffeur was given his instructions, let in his gears, and started off.

"How far have we to go?" asked Brand.

"Only a few miles, sir," answered the inspector. "Won't take us long. About that supper, sir . . ."

"Yes?" said Brand.

"Well, I rather thought you might be wanting supper, sir, so I asked Alf Taylor, who is the owner

of the Rose and Crown, sir, to get some out for you, unless you'd like to go into Salisbury?"

Brand turned to Andrew.

"Efficiency!" he said. "Nobody can say the police force isn't efficient. The Rose and Crown, Inspector, will do splendidly."

He smiled his thanks to the inspector.

No one spoke for some time; each was buried in his own thoughts. Andrew had an unpleasant feeling that they had been made fools of by this extraordinary criminal who seemed to escape from them at every point with more ease than ever. But he knew there was no use in worrying too much: all that could be done was being done. Yet all the while he felt terribly uneasy, sensing that Alan was in deadly peril and that in their very perplexity they were failing him. The thought was not agreeable.

Suddenly Andrew sat upright in his seat and shot a quick glance at Brand. He saw the latter had not missed the sound which had so startled him.

From out of the darkness somewhere on their left and some way away, there had come the sound of a long-drawn-out wail which had turned as it reached a high note into the most heart-rending howl.

"What was that?" asked Andrew sharply.

Brand was listening intently.

There came no repetition of the dismal cry. Walker, rather shakily, laughed and said:

"Don't pay any attention to it, sir. It's been heard here, round about the countryside, quite a lot at nights lately. It's put the fear of God into some of the farmers. They think it's supernatural. Some stray dog probably."

Brand turned to Andrew with a grin.

"Not surprised that they think it supernatural," he said. "Never heard such an awful row in my life. Should hate to be walking alone at night in a dense wood and hear that come out of the darkness. Wouldn't you?"

Andrew smiled.

"I certainly should," he agreed.

"Well," said Brand, "it's made me more than ever ready for that supper. Far to go now, Inspector?"

Walker smiled.

"Only a mile or two, sir."

They completed the journey in silence, each deep in his own thoughts.

CHAPTER XVII

THE Sinister Individual ceased his loathsome chuckle, and as if in spiritual accord the dog ceased howling. Alan stole a glance at Jessica standing beside him. The moon had just crept out from behind two clouds and in its pallid light her beauty seemed unearthly. Her eyes were luminous as though lit from within, her cheeks white as ivory, her lips drawn and set. There was, however, no trace of tears, no sign of any abandon to the horror of the scene. She stood there proudly erect, with a dignity born of magnificent courage, as though possessed of something which even the close proximity of death itself could not destroy.

But Alan was not allowed any leisure in which to admire such marvellous self-control. He felt himself being pushed back towards the door in the wall, the ever-present automatic pressing into the small of his back, and hurried up the path back to the luxuriously furnished room which presented so strange a contrast to the eerie, terrible spectacle within those walls.

Once more Jessica and he were trussed up in the armchairs which they had so recently vacated, once more they were left alone facing the vile fiend who stood gloating over them, his back to the fire, the hound curled up at his feet. For a few moments,

which seemed to the nerve-racked Alan to last for several minutes, he remained silent. Then suddenly he looked up at Jessica.

"Well," he said, "you have seen. I hope you are impressed with my little collection. I am certainly pleased myself. I have done well." He paused and then continued, more to himself than to his prisoners.

"It is a pity," he mused. "A great pity. I should have liked to go on adding to that collection until all those fiends in human shape who go by the name of Woman are exterminated, but I am afraid it is not to be. The chase is getting too hot, the scent too strong."

He looked at Jessica again and a wealth of loathing came into his eyes.

"It is you, my friend, you who are responsible for this. Without your interfering stupidities I might conceivably have lasted for some time yet, but I realise that I cannot hope to fool these policemen, idiots though most of them are, for very much longer. My luck has held so far, but I must acknowledge that I have been lucky: I cannot guarantee that I will always have this good fortune, and some unfortunate circumstance might land me in their hands. No: on the whole I think that I had better be content with a certain number. Her age was thirty when she left me. Well, why not let my collection be limited to thirty?"

His lips seemed to draw back from his teeth in a horrible snarl as he said the last words: he presented an appearance of the utmost ferocity which to Alan, by now almost accustomed to the man's sudden

changes of front, seemed even more terrible than ever before.

"Let me see," he went on. "Let me see. There are twenty-eight in that cemetery. My friend Fred is out at the moment collecting the twenty-ninth. He has another to assist him. They should bring her back quite soon, possibly to-night. I said thirty. Yes, the more that I think of it the more do I realise that thirty is an excellent number, so very fitting. Very well." He seemed suddenly to lash himself into a frightful rage as he spoke. "Very well." His arms shot out and a long finger pointed directly at Jessica, who involuntarily recoiled. "*You* shall be the thirtieth."

Suddenly his mood changed. He became at once his old suave self without a hint of insanity, except for the gleam in his eyes. Alan, staring at him, realised that there was plenty of excuse for not at first appreciating that this man was mad. For now he seemed the polished but somewhat mysterious individual which he had previously appeared. His voice, when at last he spoke, was as bland as ever.

"When I retire," he said, "which at the very latest will be the day after to-morrow, I shall take with me my trusted lieutenant, a man whom you have met and whom I have addressed as Bert. He will do excellently as my manservant. A splendid bodyguard. I grant you that his appearance is somewhat repellent." Here he laughed cynically. "But still he has been trained as a manservant, and I can vouch for his efficiency. On the other hand, the man who comes with me must, as I have said, have more than the usual attributes of the usual valet. He must be pre-

pared to defend my life if need be. Bert, I know, would do anything for me. He must be up to all the tricks of the trade, however. Bert, as far as I can tell, will fill the bill. But there is one method of dealing death which in the event of a sudden attack upon my person would be very useful for him to be proficient at. I believe it is an Eastern custom of dealing death, but it is particularly appealing to me for the very reason that it is silent and can be operated from a few yards' distance. I am referring to a gift of throwing knives with such skill and accuracy that the point of the whirling dagger on arriving at its destination strikes straight into the heart. It originated, I believe, in China. I have had Bert practising this very art, for it is an art, for some time, but he has never had the added incentive of a human target. It would seem to me that you, my dear girl, will do admirably as the human target."

Alan drew a sharp breath. The audacity, the fiendish cruelty of this wild project made his blood run cold.

"Quite a music-hall turn. Both of you, I feel sure, have witnessed at our best music halls the gentleman who has a lady partner standing against a door quite motionless, while he draws a pattern all round her with his knives. Well, let's see if Bert has obtained sufficient accuracy to be able to do the same. I trust he will make no mistake. It would grieve me, I say so sincerely, grieve me if by any chance he should be guilty of some unfortunate mistiming of his throw which might cause a painful wound upon your fair person. A few scratches, a few little cuts! Oh, that is no matter. You would not have

long to suffer them for by to-morrow, by to-morrow," here he lowered his voice and the full fury of his madness became apparent, "by to-morrow you will be dead."

Suddenly, with such suddenness that Alan involuntarily jumped, he threw back his head and let out a high-pitched laugh.

"If it's any comfort to you, Miss Jessica, you may know that your friend Alan Squire, sitting so near you now, will with his own hands utilise the spade with which the earth will be shovelled onto your dead body, for I trust you have not forgotten that you are to be the thirtieth, the last of my collection?"

He paused, as if to allow the complete horror of his words to sink into the minds of his two listeners.

All at once Alan lost control. He made frantic efforts to loosen the bonds which held him powerless in his chair, he struggled until the sweat poured from his forehead, all the while muttering incoherent oaths against this monster standing watching him. But, although at his first movement the Sinister Individual had dropped his hand to his coat pocket wherein no doubt his fingers had closed upon the trigger of some form of firearm, the man remained silent, motionless, an air of cynical amusement on his face. Alan leant back exhausted: he realised that there was nothing he could do, that he was hopelessly, completely in the power of this man, and that Jessica, poor Jessica, despite any effort he might make, was bound to suffer the fearful experience which this villain had just outlined.

She, herself, seemed almost unnaturally calm. She

sat still in her chair staring at her tormentor, giving no hint that she felt fear or dread at what was about to occur. Alan never admired her more than at that moment: she who was to be the victim, she who was to be put to this ghastly torture of nerve and body, she was the one who remained calm in the face of this man's deadly and by no means idle threat. Alan, to whom as yet no torment had been promised, had failed to control his nerves, had given way to the fury which possessed him; but Jessica, her face expressionless save for the light in her eyes, sat very white and still, waiting almost fatalistically for whatever might befall. Suddenly with a quick movement of her head she looked at Alan.

"Alan dear," she said, "it's no use. It only gives him pleasure. But thank you all the same."

Her words, spoken so firmly without a trace of quaver in her voice, did much to restore Alan's calm. Inwardly he was just as furious as ever, furious at his own impotence, but he knew that Jessica had said only what was true. His efforts to release himself, to spring at the man tormenting them, were so futile in the face of the bonds which held him that they could only be amusing to his captor. A calm resignation, almost unnaturally calm, such as that of Jessica, was the only attitude in which to deal with the present frightful situation.

The Sinister Individual, who had been watching them closely, seemed to appreciate that any amusement such as he had just enjoyed had now ceased. With a quick movement he turned around and rang the bell. As he did so the great hound rose to its

feet and slowly walked over to Jessica. She could not have moved away from it, even had she so desired, as it sniffed at her ankles, at the same time emitting a low growl. Alan could not help but think that this action of the hound was in a way symbolical of its master's hatred for women. The dog seemed to be completely in accord with the man smiling down at it.

"Good boy," he said, slowly, "good boy! You always had the right ideas. Good fellow! Come back here. Lie down."

The dog obeyed. Almost at the same moment the door opened and Bert entered.

"Ah!" said the Sinister Individual. "Well, Bert, I have thought the matter over and I should like to know how far you have progressed with this little knife-throwing feat which I asked you to practise."

The man grinned, an action which distorted his whole countenance.

"Not so bad, sir," he said. "Getting on."

"Good, Bert, good! It seems to me that we have here at the moment a most marvellous opportunity for a little test. I should rather like to know how much you have progressed, to what degree of efficiency you have reached. The art may be very useful to us. Who can tell? I should like you to aspire to the very greatest accuracy. I should like you to be able to throw a knife right across a room with unerring deadliness. Let's see how far you have gone towards this height of perfection. Will you please set the target"—he jerked his head towards Jessica "—in position?"

"What! Her, sir?"

To Alan's sensitive ear even this vile fellow seemed appalled at the prospect.

"Yes."

The man made a curious noise in his throat for answer, and Alan realised with falling hope that he had mistaken the man's tone for horror, while it was in reality ghoulish eagerness.

Bert almost ran across the room, roughly loosened Jessica's bonds, and pulled her to her feet. Jessica in that moment was magnificent. She made no effort to struggle with him. She accepted the inevitable with splendid dignity, allowing herself to be hustled across the room into the far corner. Alan felt his chair being moved, and turning his head quickly saw that the Sinister Individual was rounding his chair so that he would have a full view of all that occurred. He noticed also that their tormentor had drawn his automatic from his pocket and was now covering the girl, who stood upright in the corner.

"You will not move," he said. "At least, it would be inadvisable to do so. I believe that my friend Bert is fairly efficient already. He has instructions to throw the knives near you but not to get you. Do you understand what this really means? Let me tell you so that there should be no mistake. If you do move, you may move into the aim which he has taken. Am I making myself clear? Only by remaining absolutely still, motionless, can you be fairly certain of immunity."

He laughed harshly. Bert in the meantime had retired to the far end of the room and taken half a dozen vicious-looking knives, with large handles, from his pocket. These he placed on the desk in

front of him, and lifting one between his fingers poised himself ready to throw.

"Please remember, Miss Jessica," went on the Sinister Individual, "please remember not to move. I should hate there to be an accident. Perhaps you had better close your eyes."

Jessica answered nothing. She stood there, straight and slim, very pale and beautiful, a look of utter defiance on her face as though daring them to do their worst.

"Are you ready?"

The question rang through the room. Jessica looked at the Sinister Individual.

"Quite ready," she answered, quietly.

"Bert—proceed!"

Alan tried to close his eyes in order to avoid seeing the frightful scene before him—but he found it impossible. There seemed to be some fatal attraction, some morbid fascination about it which prevented him from turning aside, and he felt he could not miss one moment of the dreadful spectacle. He was utterly unable to refrain from staring at the girl standing there, presenting a figure of such indomitable courage to those who were torturing her. His heart went out to her and he longed desperately that he might change places with her, but even as these thoughts raced through his brain, tumbling over those that had gone before, he realised that it would have been impossible for him to stand there as she was doing, that in all probability he would have made a wild dash to certain death in an effort to kill their villainous captor. But there was no more time for thought.

Bert's right hand suddenly flew forward and there came the whirr of a spinning knife, horribly discernible. Almost instantaneously a curiously sharp sound came to Alan's ears and he saw the blade quivering viciously in the wall just to the left of Jessica's head.

"Quite good!" came the suave voice. "Quite good! Now put one on the other side."

Almost before he had finished speaking Bert had thrown the second knife and Alan saw it sticking in the wall quivering, like the other, only a few inches from Jessica's head.

"My dear Bert," came the voice, a rather surprised note in it. "My dear Bert, I had no idea you had obtained to such proficiency. It is perfectly splendid, perfectly splendid! Now let us see a knife between her right arm and her body. Oh, just one moment." He turned to Jessica. "Just lift your arm slightly, Miss Jessica. At the moment there is very little room for a knife to come to rest on the wall. Bert has shown us that he is quite good, quite good really, considering the few opportunities he has had to practise, but you are presenting him just at present with too small a target. I am afraid of an accident. Just a little higher. That's it. Yes, that's perfect. Thank you very much. Now, Bert."

Once again Bert's hand flew forward, the whirring sound came to Alan's ears, and the knife crashed into the wall in the allotted space. But this time it did not stick in the plaster; the handle must have struck the wall first, for the knife fell with a metallic ring to the floor.

"Well, well," remarked the Sinister Individual,

"you can't always get it. I hope, Bert, that some day you will be able to, some day quite soon. Perhaps you had better try that one again."

No sooner said than done. Back went Bert's hand, forward came the knife, and a second later there it was quivering between Jessica's arm and her body.

Bert laughed. Alan looked at him and immediately saw that the vile man was evidently enjoying himself hugely. As he picked up the fifth knife Alan realised in a flash that the whole scene of testing out the man's prowess was a put-up pretense. The way in which Bert fingered his knives, the way in which he had laughed, all went to prove that the fellow was really an expert at this dreadful craft. He was missing on purpose as he had been told to do, but he was missing with a certainty that came of long years of practice. The man, had he so willed, could have put an end to Jessica's life with the very first knife. Alan shuddered at the enormity of cruelty which had forced this frightful pantomime upon them. With every moment he came to loathe with a greater intensity the tall, thin figure standing opposite, gloating down at him.

"You have two more knives, I think?" said the Sinister Individual.

"Yes, sir."

"What about one on the other side?"

"Lift your arm a bit, miss. I don't want to make any mistake."

Apathetically Jessica did as she was told, and almost before she had become still once more the fifth knife was shining in the wall where her arm had just been.

"Excellent!" remarked their captor. "Excellent! One more, eh? Let me see, now; where would that one best go?"

Almost before the sound of his voice had died away the door was thrown open and a man appeared.

"Oh," said the Sinister Individual. "You surprised me, Fred; I hadn't expected you quite so soon. Well, what have you to report?"

"Got her downstairs, sir."

"Splendid! You are sure of her age?"

"Yes, sir. Made careful inquiries, sir."

"Good; and she fulfils the other conditions? She is attractive? She is pretty?"

"Yes, sir. Supposed to be the beauty of her village, sir."

The man smirked.

"Excellent! Er . . . she's quite dead?"

"Quite dead, sir. Knife in the right place."

"Ah, how very funny you should say that! We were just wondering where the right place for another knife was! Still, I think we can postpone this little performance, Bert. Our guest would no doubt like to see how we add to the collection."

He turned towards Jessica.

"May I congratulate you, my dear friend," he said to her in the deep, even voice which carried so much menace. "You have stood the ordeal very well. Oh, I am so sorry; I was afraid the strain might be too much."

As he said these words Jessica suddenly reeled and fell to the ground. Alan lost all control again

and with a shout tried once more to free himself from the bonds which held him so tightly, but again he found it was useless. On the verge of tears, impotent, he was constrained to remain there helplessly, watching the Sinister Individual and Bert walking over to the girl, picking her up, and carrying her to the chair.

Bert went for water, came back with it, and a few moments later under his surprisingly gentle ministrations Jessica opened her eyes.

"Feeling better, my dear?"

For a moment the girl stared blankly about her; then in an instant she realised what had happened and where she was, and a look of the most stark terror, which cut straight to Alan's heart, overshadowed her face. A few seconds later, however, she was once more in full control of her wits.

"Quite better, thank you."

"Splendid!" said the Sinister Individual. "Well, shall we proceed to the next item on the programme for this evening? The addition of the latest specimen to its resting-place in the collection."

He made a sign, upon which the man, Fred, disappeared. Another entered immediately and escorted Jessica out of the door and along that paved path which, Alan knew only too well, led to those dread walls.

In the meantime Bert undid Alan's bonds, and shoving his automatic in his back once more in a most ostentatious manner, forced him to follow her. They moved along until they came to the door in the wall. This was opened. Bert pushed Alan

through and along to the far end; there he saw Jessica standing. The two were lined up against the wall and their guards stood on either side.

Suddenly a dark shape came running along the path. Alan saw that it was the hound: it stopped within a few feet of him and Alan noticed beyond him an opening yawning in the ground. It was only too clear what this sinister black hole signified, but his eye caught another movement. He looked up to see in procession the Sinister Individual himself, closely followed by two of his satellites carrying the two ends of a stretcher on which lay something clothed in white. As they approached, Alan saw that it was the figure of what had once been a young girl; a great, dark stain covered one side of her white dress. From this there stuck a few inches of hilt, which Alan realised was the handle of a knife. A feeling of nausea nearly overpowered him, but he managed to recover himself. So much had happened that evening, so much that was terrible, that was frightful, that he seemed to be almost immune from these recurrent ghoulish sights and shocks.

The Sinister Individual and his gang wasted no time. The corpse was thrown into the hole made ready for it, and as the vile figure stood upright once more, seeming, in the darkness, of immense height, the two men shovelled the earth over, filling up the hole. Then with a quickness which Alan realised could only have been born of long practice, and which made him glance at the other mounds all round, they heaped up the earth to form yet another barrow.

As they stood up erect once more, their task com-

pleted, there came again that loathsome chuckle from the madman standing before the grave, in triumphant gloating over the culmination of his foulness, and the dog suddenly threw back its head . . . and howled.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE big car drew up outside the police station. As he got out, closely following Brand, Andrew noticed the sign of "The Rose & Crown" waving in the breeze before the public house next door. They first went into the station to ascertain whether any reports had come in from the officers who had been sent to find out all they could in regard to the aircraft, but so far none had returned.

Brand turned to Andrew.

"Nothing else we can do now. Except a little food, I think."

Andrew agreed.

Led by Walker they made their way to the public house and were introduced to the landlord, a rotund little fellow with a spiritous complexion. What Walker had told him with regard to the identity of his two guests was obscure, but it must have been something of a very flattering nature, for the little man was obviously all agog to do his best and to please.

He conducted them straight to a private parlour, where a table had been laid against their advent. Thereupon Walker departed back to the station.

"Won't be a minute, gentlemen. Might I suggest that while the food is coming you should have a little liquid refreshment . . . on me?"

Brand smiled.

"That's very kind of you, landlord. That's very kind of you. Frankly it's turned a bit chilly outside and I wouldn't mind a gin and French at all."

The little fellow bustled off and soon returned with three short drinks. These he handed round and took the last one himself.

"Here's to you, sir, and to the success of your quest."

Brand smilingly acknowledged the toast.

The food, when it came, was plain but of excellent quality and admirably cooked; and Andrew suddenly realised that he was extremely hungry. His interest in the events which had taken place before had been so great that this important fact had quite escaped him, but he now did full justice to the appetising meal. He noticed that Brand did likewise, while all the time the little landlord was striving his utmost to please, hovering round the table and trying to anticipate any requests that might be made. The inspector engaged him in pleasant conversation, and it was then that Andrew obtained some small insight into his friend's great success as he sat there, perfectly at ease, chatting to the little landlord about harvests, farming, country subjects generally which Andrew would never have supposed lay within his ken.

But as the end of the meal approached Brand fell silent, and Andrew guessed that his brain was busy tabulating what little success they had had in the investigation. After a few minutes of silence Brand suddenly looked up and addressed his host.

"When we were driving along coming to the

station," he said, sharply, "we heard a most almighty howl. Odd noise. Eerie. Decidedly unpleasant. Sounded like a dog in much pain."

Andrew, who had been looking at the landlord while Brand was speaking, noticed with astonishment that the man's face fell considerably. Some of the colour seemed to have gone from it, his eyes looked startled, his whole demeanour suggested that the detective's remark had upset him.

"Good Lord!" he blurted out. "Did you hear the hound again?"

"The hound?" said Brand. "Again?"

Andrew appreciated that, following his usual procedure, Brand was getting a cross-check on the rather astonishing explanation which the local inspector had supplied at the moment they had heard the dismal sound. He was evidently feigning to know nothing whatever on the subject, proposing that the landlord should tell him in his own words his own view of that howl in the night which had so startled them.

"What do you mean—the hound again?" prompted Brand.

The landlord shifted uneasily with his feet.

"I don't know, sir," he replied. "I wish I did, but people round here, people say that it isn't good to hear that howl."

"Oh," said Brand, with a light laugh. "Why?"

The little landlord pulled himself together.

"People say, sir, and I wish it wasn't true, but I know that it is, that whenever anybody hears that howl, then something awful happens the very same night."

Brand sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"What are you suggesting, mine host?" He laughed gaily. "Do you mean to say that people round here think that that noise is supernatural?"

"I don't know about that, sir." The man was in deadly earnest, rather worried at the light way in which Brand was taking his explanation, evidently doing all that he could to persuade the inspector of his seriousness. "All I can tell you is this: the sound of that howl has come occasionally, always at night and always from the woods, just about the time that you heard it this evening, and it's perfectly true, sir, that nobody's ever seen a dog which might have made the noise. Lots of us, sir, lots of us, me included, have been out whenever we have heard that howl, with our shotguns looking for it. When it first came we thought it was a mad dog or something, but some of us took it into our heads to make inquiries and every dog round the place can be accounted for. Well, we thought it might have been a stray come from a distance. I have just told you we went out to look for it, but although one or two of us have been so near to that howl that we thought it came from the very ground beneath us, we have never seen so much as a glimpse of the brute's tail. Well, sir, that gets on your nerves, especially if the sound is followed by . . ."

Andrew, watching him closely, was amazed at the change which had come over this cheerful little fellow. One moment, the moment before Brand had mentioned the subject, he had been his usual self, smiling, happy, endeavouring in every way to please, contentedly busying himself with his duties, but now

. . . he was standing there, a great deal of colour vanished from his face, an expression in his eyes which Andrew, accustomed to judging men, could only diagnose as fear. It was not the fear which comes through dread of physical pain, but the terror which comes from horror of the unknown.

"Followed by?" Brand spoke sharply.

"Something awful. Some dreadful thing. A murder."

"A what?" Brand's voice rang like a pistol shot through the air.

"A murder, for instance."

"Look here," said Brand, "you are talking through your hat, you know you are."

The little man looked at him.

"My God, sir, I am not. If . . . if you only knew how much I wish I was! Listen to me, sir: that sound has only come to us in the last few weeks. The first time it happened a girl in the next village disappeared. She wasn't found. She's never been seen since, but near the spot where she was last seen the police discovered marks of a struggle and stains upon the ground, dark stains, sir, you know . . . blood."

"Did they ever find the body?"

The landlord looked at Brand as if grateful to him for believing the story he was unfolding.

"That's right, sir. It was murder, of that we are convinced. No one ever found the body."

"Odd!" said Brand.

"Well, sir, the next time that howl was heard a girl disappeared in exactly the same circumstances, from the town. It's only fifteen miles away, but that

dog or devil, whatever it is, seemed to know, for it howled that night in the woods round here just as it had done a week before when the girl from the village had been taken. That was murder, too, sir."

"And did they never find the murderer?"

"No, not a sign, sir. Wouldn't have been much good if they had, really, because they couldn't have proved he'd murdered the girl. She disappeared, but you see, in just the same way again, not a sign of her. But, sir, surely you know about these things?"

Brand looked at the little landlord.

"I know about these two disappearances," he said, "and if it's any comfort to you, I appreciate the fact that they were murders. I didn't know that the dog had howled, though, each time."

"Dog, do you call it?" cried his host. "It may be a hound for all I know, but if it is it's a hound of hell. Ten days later, sir, that dog howled again but we were ready for it. I had organised a party, all with shotguns. We closed in on that wood, we beat it towards the centre. We didn't even hear the beast again. It comes from somewhere near that farm that's being run by Mr. Green. He heard it. He said so. He told me personally that night that he had been out to look for it but he could not catch a sight or glimpse of it. It's got on everybody's nerves, sir. It's got on all of us. We don't know what we believe it is, but there are very few would take their oath that it came from a living beast."

Brand had allowed the man to complete his explanation without interruption, but now that he seemed to have come to the end he gently helped him.

"And was that particular howl followed by any outrage?"

"It was, sir. Another girl went. A girl well known to us all. She lived not more than a few miles from this very spot. Pretty she was, a sweet girl, sweet-natured, we all liked her. She went! She disappeared! She was in her father's house alone one night. She looked after him. He was out late somewhere. When he came back there was nobody to open the door. He got alarmed, broke his way in, found nothing except a frightful mess. Furniture broken, all sorts of things crocked up in the kitchen, and . . . and a great deal of blood upon the floor."

"Yes," said Brand, musingly, "I know about that too, but I wish to God they'd told me about this howl a little earlier. If I'd known, why . . . well, there might have been a difference."

He remained for a few moments in silence, lost in thought. Then suddenly he looked up.

"And did you try again to locate the hound?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Twice more it has happened before to-night. Twice more have I been out after it, but not a thing have I seen. Not even a glimpse of its whisker. I tell you, sir"—the little man leant forward in his excitement over the table—"I tell you, sir, I don't believe that there is such an animal."

"Oh," said Brand, "what do you believe, then?"

The little fellow remained motionless for a moment staring at Brand, then quietly drew himself up again.

"You've got me beat; I don't know. At least I do

know, but . . . well, it seems stupid to say it now, only out there looking for that beast all alone except for the gun I was carryin, in the darkness of the night . . . I was ready to believe anything!"

"Yes," said Brand, "I know. That's how these stories get about of ghosts and things. I don't blame you, landlord. I know what it's like to be out alone in a dark wood on a dark night. But it's a pity; yes, I repeat, a great pity I was not told of this before."

Again Brand lapsed into silence. The landlord remained quietly standing there waiting his pleasure, waiting for the next question which he felt was bound to come. Andrew dared not interrupt Brand's thoughts. He also maintained silence, watching the pair with breathless interest, striving to understand what Brand's insistency meant.

Suddenly the inspector looked up.

"Look here," he said, "can you remember the dates, by any chance?"

"Yes, sir. Every one—at least the three that I went out after the sound. The third of last month was the first time, a week later, that would be the tenth, was the second, and right at the end of the month, about the 28th or 29th I should say, was the last time. Just three weeks ago, sir, and now you have heard it again to-night."

The little man seemed to lose all control. He took a step forward, and leaning on the table, his face quite close to Brand's, he whispered chokingly:

"And you mark my words, sir, you mark my words, to-morrow there'll be another one . . . gone."

"Anotner girl murdered?"

Brand was quite calm; his voice betrayed none of the emotion which he must have felt.

"Yes, sir. Another girl gone. That's what it means —that howl. That's what it's always meant before. God, I wish we could stop it!"

"I shall do my best to," said Brand, with such determination and purpose in his voice that Andrew looked at him sharply. "I shall do my very best to, and I hope before long to succeed. In the meantime, my friend," he looked up at the landlord with a quiet smile, "I think the best thing you can do is to try to convince our superstitious friends about here, and I am afraid that you yourself come in that category, that if that howl is genuine, if it is a howl, and I can vouch that it is because I have heard it myself to-night, then it is the howl of a dog or some such beast and does not come from any hound of hell, see? I don't want the whole countryside to lose its morale by talk of ghosts and so forth."

The little man stood upright again.

"I'll do my best, sir, but they won't believe me. I am not sure what I believe myself!"

"I know," said Brand, sympathetically, "I know. Now mind, my friend, that you take it from me. Say that Detective Inspector Brand, of Scotland Yard, says so."

"I'll do my best," repeated the landlord.

"Very good! Now do you think we could have a little coffee?"

"Of course, sir. I am so sorry."

Once more, the little man's mind taken off the mysterious howling which came out of the night,

and filled with thoughts of his duties, he rushed from the room to execute the order.

Brand threw the stump of his cigarette into the fire, took out his case and lit another; and then very quietly looked up at Andrew.

"My friend," he said, "do you realise that the dates given to us by this man, the dates of the nights that this mystery dog has howled, do you realise that they are the very dates of the many murders we have traced to this master criminal whom we are chasing?"

Andrew nodded.

"I got that," he said, "from the conversation. These girls disappeared in the same way. I gathered what you were after."

"Yes," said Brand, "I thought you would. I don't like it, my friend, I don't like it."

The coffee was served and they drank it in silence, then rose to go. When it came to settling with the landlord the excellent little fellow refused steadily to accept one penny from them.

"No, sir," he remarked to Brand. "You have been good to me. You have listened to my story. You have given me hope, sir. Not one penny will I take, sir. It's a pleasure, sir, a real pleasure."

It was useless to try to persuade him. They thanked him and wished him a good night. Then, once more in the street, they started to walk the few paces to the station.

"Bless it!" said Brand, and Andrew realised that he was talking to himself. "Dang it! I'll bet there'll be another reported to-morrow."

Andrew knew what he meant only too well. A

feeling of hopelessness came over him, hopelessness at the power of the fiend whom they were fighting. He seemed to hold them in the hollow of his hand, to do as he willed despite authority.

But just at that moment there came from some distance away, breaking the silence of the night, a long-drawn howl, like the cry of some lost soul, a wail that Lucifer might have emitted on being cast from heaven, devilish, abandoned . . . and full of menace.

CHAPTER XIX

BRAND and Andrew stopped dead, listening intently. Andrew felt a great shiver of apprehension run through his body: the eeriness, the horror of that sound coming through the darkness struck him with such force that he had a violent desire to run away, to run anywhere in an attempt to escape the uncanny howl.

Brand came close to him and laid his hand on Andrew's arm.

"Where did it come from?" he asked. "Quick! Get the direction fixed in your mind. It's of vital importance."

Andrew realised that the inspector had spoken in a whisper and he almost laughed. So the terror of the situation had affected even the calm inspector! But Brand's tone was urgent, and although Andrew could not understand the import of his query, he saw that it was one to which the inspector attached considerable importance. He fixed in his own mind the direction from which he thought the howl had come, but at that moment Brand pulled his arm.

"Come on," he said, "we've no time to waste."

The inspector was running towards the police station, and Andrew quickly followed him. In a moment they were inside and had turned into In-

spector Walker's office. The latter jumped up to meet them. Their appearance must have been surprising, for as Walker looked at them his eyes became questioning.

"That howl," said Brand, "just heard it."

"What! Again?"

"Yes," said Brand, shortly.

A look of apprehension came into Walker's face.

"That's the first time it's been heard twice in one night!"

"Well, let's try to see if we can make it the last time," retorted Brand. "Got a large-scale map of this district?"

His question struck Andrew as peculiar, but Walker never hesitated. Rapidly he jumped to the cupboard beside him, opened it, and withdrew the required article. Brand spread it out on the desk and placed it in such a way that the street outside the room in which they sat was directly parallel to the same street marked on the map.

"Now then, Captain," Brand said, looking up, "just mark the direction from which you thought you heard that howl."

So saying he handed Andrew a pencil. Andrew moved round and looked at the map, noting his position. Then without any hesitation he placed the pencil so that it lay on the map in an easterly direction.

"Yes," said Brand, who had been peering over his shoulder, "I agree."

He took a ruler and ran a thin line on the map in the direction from which they thought the sound had come.

"Now," said Brand, "look here: a bit rough, I know, still it may help. All we want is to find somebody else."

He looked down again at the map.

"Somebody, say, from this farm who heard the sound and who'll tell us from what direction he thought it came. If we prolong his line on this map in his direction, where the two lines intersect should give us the approximate place whence the howl came."

Andrew smiled to himself. Rough it certainly was, but a sound idea and it might prove useful.

Brand looked at the wood marked on the map.

"There seems to be a farm in here," he said. "A farm, just on the edge."

"Yes, sir," said Walker. "Belongs to the hungry farmer, sir."

"To the what?"

"He's known as the hungry farmer round here, sir. He's a very rich man. I don't know how he made his money. Came here about a year ago. Just farming for fun, I think. Employs a fairly large staff who seem to eat a lot."

Brand disregarded the man's comments.

"He won't do, anyway," he said. "He's too near, I am afraid. Might do as a cross-check later. Look here," he pointed to the farm on the map which he had originally mentioned. "Know these people?"

"Yes, sir," said Walker.

"Run along as fast as you can," said Brand. "Take this map with you. Find them. Wake somebody up if they're asleep, but I pray to God they won't be."

"It's pretty late," answered Walker, "but I don't think they'll be in bed yet."

"Good! Get somebody to tell you in what direction he heard this howl. You understand the idea, don't you? Mark it on the map. Then come into that wood. You will find the captain and myself having a look round. If you haven't found us in three quarters of an hour, then go along to that farm, the hungry farmer's, or whatever you call him. That's where we shall be."

"Very good," said Walker.

He took his cap from the hook on which it hung upon the wall, picked up the map, folded it, and placed it in his pocket. Just as he was about to leave, Brand stopped him.

"Got a gun?" he asked.

"Why—no, sir."

"Take one," said Brand, shortly. "You may want it."

Walker looked at his superior in surprise, but Brand's face was very serious. Without a word Walker returned to his desk, unlocked a drawer, and took out a pistol. This he filled with cartridges which he took from the same drawer, after which he placed the automatic in his pocket, and then turned to Brand.

"Anything else, sir?"

"No," said Brand, "except speed. Quick as you can, mind. Should like you to meet us before we get to that farm in the wood."

"Very good, sir."

Walker disappeared through the door and they heard him running along the street.

Brand turned to Andrew.

"Captain," he said, "I have brought this little fellow down, a spare one in case of need. I don't say that you will want it but I am taking no risks. Keep it in your pocket."

So saying, he took from his own pocket a small automatic.

"No need to ask you if you know how to handle these things," he said with a smile, handing it over.

"None whatever," answered Andrew.

"I thought not. It's loaded."

Andrew took it without a word and placed it in his pocket. There was something about Detective Inspector Brand's actions at the moment which seemed to denote a belief that they were going into action. For the life of him Andrew could not restrain himself from asking a question.

"What do you expect, Brand?" he laughed. "The hound of hell?"

"No," said Brand, shortly. "A mad dog."

Andrew looked at him. Brand did not quiver an eyelash, and Andrew realised that more lay beneath these words than their ordinary interpretation, but at that moment he could not understand what it might be.

Brand looked round the comfortable office.

"Sorry to leave this," he said. "Not afraid of the dark personally, just don't like dark woods on dark nights. Still, nothing for it. Come along."

He led the way out to the street. They cleared the village in a very short time and were soon making their way across the two fields which separated them from the fringe of the wood. They walked in

silence, but it was not until they reached it that Brand made any attempt to walk quietly. Just as they were within a few paces of the wood, however, he turned to Andrew with a finger on his lips. Andrew nodded and they plunged into the undergrowth.

He was amazed at Brand's unerring instinct in the darkness. He seemed able to sense a twig, which might snap beneath his foot and so betray his presence, as well as though he could see it with his eyes in the daylight. Andrew decided that it was best to follow carefully in his footsteps, as in that way he would make less noise than if he took a separate path himself. In remarkable silence they made their way through the wood, stopping at times to listen for any sound. But none came. The howl was not repeated, the woods seemed unnaturally quiet.

For some time Brand wandered about, Andrew following him, his thoughts chaotic. That he was nervous he could not deny. But nervous of what? He did not know. All their surroundings seemed to create and intensify a state of nervousness: seeking for some thing, they knew not what, which had given that unearthly cry, seeking for it in the pitch dark of the trees, for the light of the moon was completely obscured from them all the while by clouds.

Once, as they crept along, some little animal, startled from its sleep, scudded away in the darkness. Andrew's heart leapt to his throat, but Brand never hesitated an instant or missed a step. Rather ashamed of himself, Andrew followed again. He was

glad at that moment of the darkness, for his face, he knew, was flushed and he would not have liked Brand to realise how apprehensive he felt.

They must have been moving for about half an hour when suddenly Brand halted, so suddenly that Andrew very nearly bumped into him. Brand pointed with his finger straight in front, and following the direction indicated Andrew saw a little shining between the trees.

"There's the jolly farmer—I mean hungry farmer," said Brand in a whisper. "Must be his place. Well, we've been right through this blinking wood. No sign of spectral hound. Glad. Don't mind human beings. Dislike ghosts. Wonder where Walker is?"

This query was answered with starling suddenness. From slightly behind them and rather to their left they heard the noise of a man coming through the wood.

"Hm," said Brand in a low voice. "Gentleman requires training in tackling woods at dead of night. He'd frighten a rabbit a mile away. Still, has its uses. We know where he is. Come along."

Still moving with uncanny silence Brand proceeded in a direction which Andrew realised would cut off the path taken by the local inspector. They came upon him so suddenly that Walker jumped back a pace and Andrew saw him thrust his hand in his pocket and withdraw the automatic.

"Put that back," said Brand quietly.

"Very good, sir."

Walker's voice betrayed how much he had been

startled. "I thought you were . . . I thought you were . . ."

Brand laughed shortly.

"I am not," he said. "Well, anybody hear that howl from the farm?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have got the direction?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you plan it out on the map?"

"Yes, sir."

"And where," said Brand, "did the lines intersect?"

"Can we show a light, sir?"

"I don't see why we shouldn't," answered Brand. "But I don't see any necessity for it. Just tell me."

"Very well, sir. The lines crossed within about a hundred yards of this farm."

"On which side?"

"To the east of it, sir. Just about where we are standing now, I should say. That light is the light of the farmhouse."

"So I gathered. Just about here, is it?"

"Yes, sir, just about here."

"Well," said Brand, "to within about a quarter of a mile each way we have probably got the place where the howl came from."

He looked suddenly towards the lighted window which was still visible through the trees.

"It seems to me," he said, "that living bang on the spot that farmer should know more about this howl than any of us."

"Yes, sir," said Walker, "but he doesn't seem to."

"You say he has acknowledged hearing it?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Came out with me once to look for it."

"Oh, so you've been out, too?" said Brand, sharply.

Walker looked sheepish.

"Yes, sir. I went out with the landlord of the Rose and Crown once."

Brand smiled.

"And do you believe it to be a hound of hell, too? Something unnatural?"

Walker hesitated only for a moment.

"No, sir."

"Good!" said Brand. "Glad country police have some sense, anyway. But I suppose the fact that you didn't believe it to be ghostly prevented you from reporting the matter. Negligent of you, Walker. Sorry about that. Delayed investigation considerably."

"But, sir . . ." began the man.

"I don't want to hear any more about it. Regret it, but no use crying over spilt milk. Come on. Introduce me to this hungry farmer."

In silence they made their way through the gradually thinning wood to the farmhouse. Walker was about to go round the outhouses in order to reach the front door of the farm, but Brand stopped him.

"No," he said. "Straight through. Back door."

Walker looked surprised, but obeyed his superior. They passed a high, walled-in enclosure which Brand regarded curiously. They then found themselves on a paved path which led to the room from which they

had seen the light in the window. A door confronted them. Walter knocked. A minute later the figure of a man approaching could be seen, and it was opened to them.

"Oh, good-evening, Walker."

"Good-evening, Mr. Green. I have brought two friends round."

Walker had stepped into the room. Brand and Andrew followed him.

"Mr. Green, this is Detective Inspector Brand of Scotland Yard. This is his friend, Captain Burns."

Green shook hands with both of them and closed the door behind them.

"Care for a drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks," said Brand. "We're here on business."

All this time Andrew had been surreptitiously examining Green. He was dressed in clothing superior to the ordinary farmer's get-up. He wore a grey flannel suit which, though old and worn in places, had obviously once been well-cut: it bore the unmistakable stamp of a good London tailor. He had discarded the heavy boots which he wore, no doubt, during the daytime, for a pair of leather slippers, and his hair was neatly brushed. But there was something about his face which belied the agreeable effect produced by his clothes. His eyes were small and shifty, his face of a rather criminal type, high cheekbones and a nose which had obviously at some previous time been broken. He was very dark, which gave his jowl a grey look, and there was a vicious-looking red scar over his left temple. An-

drew realised that he was being scarcely fair: the darkness of the man's hair and that angry scar did much to lend him a more ominous appearance in the night time than he probably bore by day.

Andrew then glanced about and was amazed at the luxury displayed in the room wherein they found themselves. It was obviously a study, furnished sumptuously and with great taste. Not at all the sort of room Andrew had formerly associated with a farm, but it then flashed across his brain that Walker had mentioned that this man was very rich and evidently only ran the farm for an occupation. He had no more time for thought, for Green, looking at Brand with rather a surprised expression, was speaking.

"Oh, what have I done to attract the attention of Scotland Yard?"

Brand smiled.

"Nothing," he said, "as far as I know. Mr. Green, there is a dog which has been howling lately, a hound of some sort, round about these parts."

"Oh, that!" said Green, with a laugh. "Yes. He has howled twice to-night, too."

Brand looked at him closely and realised that although the story of some spectral hound had been credited in the neighborhood, this man at least did not conform to the popular opinion.

"Yes," he answered, "it has howled twice to-night and that is why I am here. It's a peculiar thing that violence and sudden death have always followed the howling of this hound. It's a peculiar thing, too, that nobody can trace the dog which emits this displeasing noise."

He smiled as he said the words, and Green smiled back.

"That's quite true," he said, "and round about here people think that it's a ghostly dog or some such tommy-rot of that sort. Personally I don't believe in ghosts."

"Neither do I," said Brand, "and that as a matter of fact puts the reason of my visit in a nutshell. I don't believe in ghosts but I don't like coincidences. It might be only a coincidence, it might be some dog which its owner thinks safely tucked up in its basket and which takes night prowls. On the other hand, I don't like the way it always howls on the night there is violence; so I am just making a little investigation. Can you tell me from what direction that dog howled?"

Green scratched his head.

"Not sure that I can," he said. "I don't pay much attention to it."

"Try to remember," said Brand persuasively. "It's the second time the sound came that I want to place. What direction, now? Just throw up your arm in the direction you think it came from."

"I don't know," said Green. "Let me see, now. Well, it might have been from there."

He pointed his arm straight out of the window.

"Yes," said Brand, "I think it was. That, as a matter of fact, coincides with my own idea and the idea of someone else; but I wonder, Mr. Green, if you'd mind if we just went round your outhouses and things? Supposing it is a mad dog which escapes, and I think it must be, it might be lurking somewhere about your farm. If we can get it and put

an end to it, it would be a good thing, you know."

"For the sake of my neighbours?" Green laughed. "Yes, I suppose it would. So you credit the idea of its being a mad dog, Inspector, do you? In spite, I mean, in spite of the coincidences?"

Brand looked at him sharply. He had a nasty suspicion that this man was making fun of him, but it vanished instantly.

"Strange things do happen," he said. "The truth is stranger than fiction, anyway, isn't it? So we are told, but it would not be a bad idea to look round if you wouldn't mind. I should like you to show us the way, as you know the geography of the place."

"Why, of course," said Green, pleasantly. "Come along."

He led the way out of the door and along the paved path. He turned to the right at the end just before a door leading to the walled-in enclosure which Brand had previously noticed. They examined the various outhouses, arriving first at the stables.

"Can't be in there," said Green. "Everything locked up for the night."

"I see," said Brand, and they continued their search, but no dog could they find lurking in the precincts of the farm.

"How many men do you employ on the farm?" suddenly asked Brand.

"Five," replied Green, curtly.

On their way back Green turned to Brand.

"Well," he remarked, "now that I have satisfied you, surely you will come in and have a drink?

It's a cold night, very cold for this time of year, and whiskey prevents a chill."

"It's very kind of you," Brand replied, "but I am afraid I haven't time. Have to get back to London to-night if I can. Anyway, I want to have a look round this wood once more."

As he spoke they were passing the door to the walled-in enclosure.

Brand stopped.

"What's in there?" he asked.

"Frames," replied Green, without hesitation.

"Frames?"

"Yes." The other laughed. "I force vegetables in there. Just my kitchen garden, I suppose you'd call it. Care to look?"

"Well," remarked Brand, "it wouldn't be a bad idea."

Green, without a word, took a key from his pocket, which he fitted into the lock and turned. As he opened the door he smiled over his shoulder at Brand.

"I am not so sure, Inspector," he said, "that you don't credit that supernatural hound after all. This door was locked, the wall is high, no hound excepting a supernatural one could possibly have jumped it."

Brand had followed Green through the door and did not reply to the man's taunt. He looked curiously about him. On each side of a central path large frames were placed concealing, no doubt, vegetables which were being grown therein. Brand turned without a word and Green locked the door once more.

"Well, Mr. Green," said the inspector, "thank you very much for your courtesy. I am sorry we troubled you."

"Not at all," said Green. "Anything I can do for the police is most welcome, but I must say that I think you are wasting your time, Inspector, chasing ghostly dogs, don't you?"

He flung the question rather provocatively. Brand looked at him.

"Maybe," he replied. "Still, I am paid to know how to use my time. Good-evening."

Without another word he walked off, closely followed by Andrew and Inspector Walker.

CHAPTER XX

JUST as it had happened not so very long before, the howling of the cur stopped abruptly as the Sinister Individual ceased his chuckling. Turning slowly on his heel the tall figure retraced his steps between the mounds and walked back along the paved path, the hound following close behind him.

Alan felt himself prodded in the back, and realised that he was compelled to follow. Once more they returned to that lighted room, once again were they tied to their chairs. The Sinister Individual's satellites then left him, with the exception of the man known as Bert, who remained standing, evidently awaiting orders. It was some time, however, before his master spoke: he stood leaning one elbow on the mantelpiece, staring into the fire which still blazed brightly and which reflected his face in such a manner that Alan could not help but notice the likeness which the man bore to the fiend incarnate.

The dog, meanwhile, crouched at his feet but did not go to sleep. Its eyes remained open, staring at Jessica with such balefulness that to Alan's excited imagination it seemed to radiate cruelty and hatred. The Sinister Individual stayed thus for an appreciable time; then in as abrupt a manner as were all his movements, he turned towards Bert.

"You will take with you two men," he said. "You

will collect the aëroplane. It will not be an easy matter to escape notice, but I think the night is dark enough and the roads sufficiently deserted at this hour. But be careful, Bert, my friend, be careful! We don't want any curiosity aroused with regard to this house. Remember, I hate suspicion. I like to know everything about other people, but I hate them to suspect anything about me."

He laughed; then he turned suddenly to Alan.

"One of the peculiar attributes," he said, "of these light aëroplanes which are being built nowadays in such numbers, is the fact that they can be housed so easily in a confined space. With their folding wings the ordinary garage, so they say, is large enough. I have a place in which your Araminta will be quite safe and even more comfortable than in an ordinary garage. I shall put her in my stables." He smiled. "You are surprised. Let me explain. There are no stalls to my stables. With a view to just such a possibility as having to house an aëroplane in them, the stalls were removed, leaving what I might perhaps describe as a long, empty, hall-like space between walls and under a roof. Araminta will fit splendidly there." Suddenly he looked up again at his lieutenant. "Why have you not gone, Bert?"

"Sorry, sir, but may I say something?"

"You may, you may."

"I should like to suggest, sir, that I collect the aëroplane a little later. We haven't given them much time, sir, and they may not have got the note out yet. I don't want to find more men than I can help."

"I think your fears are unwarranted," remarked the Sinister Individual. "But still . . ."

"Sir," interrupted Bert, "there's another thing: there may still be a few stray people coming home along the roads. It isn't quite late enough. D'you mind, sir, if I go a little later? I'll bring it in to-night, never fear."

"Do as you please!" replied his master. "Do as you please!"

"Very good, sir."

Bert turned on his heel and went out of the room. As the door closed behind him the Sinister Individual turned towards Jessica.

"My dear," he said, "I hope that the little experiment, the little trial of Bert's skill which took place not so very long ago in this room, has not upset you?"

Jessica smiled and Alan marvelled that she could smile at such a recollection.

"You saw how much it upset me," she replied, coldly.

"Yes, yes! I am sorry that it made you faint. Very sorry, but still it could not be helped. I do hope that you have forgiven me? I do hope that you appreciate the necessity? It was essential for me to try out the skill of my friend Bert. You see, so much may depend upon it later . . . in a tight corner, for instance. You can quite understand, can't you?"

Alan detested the suave tones, the cynical expression on the face of the monster before them.

Jessica replied in freezing tones:

"I quite see that the opportunity may have been useful to the couple of you."

"Thank you, thank you. I am so pleased that you

are sensible. Er . . . there's one other little thing. . . . I trust that the spectacle which you saw this evening hasn't—well, disturbed you?"

"Not in the least," said Jessica, firmly.

"Good! I am delighted. You have a personal interest, you see. All that you have witnessed tonight is only what will happen to yourself tomorrow night."

He spoke the last words slowly: his whole expression changed as he pronounced them. He seemed to be the reincarnation of the foulest beast that had ever been born to any woman. But Jessica did not flinch. She remained holding his eyes with her own, staring at him with a quiet, cold expression. The watching Alan longed to cheer her gallant courage.

"By heavens, fair lady, but you are brave!"

The tribute came grudgingly from his lips and Alan grasped at the straw which was offered him, wondering whether the man might possibly be relenting, wavering in his maliciousness.

"Why on earth," he cried, "are you torturing the poor girl? What has she done to you that she deserves this? You have been actually merciful to those other twenty-nine victims, compared to what you are doing to Jessica! They, at least, were killed suddenly without having the mental torture of knowing that their death was coming to them so soon. But with her you are . . ."

"Silence!" The Sinister Individual raised an imperious hand. "Why am I doing this to her? Isn't it plain? Isn't it clear? Don't you see, you poor fellow, what she has done to me? She has forced

me to terminate the continuation of my collection, to which I had intended to devote my time on earth; she has forced me to fix upon a final number. It is through her efforts and her efforts alone that the police are close upon my heels. She is going to be made to suffer for it, mark my words! To suffer for it, do you hear? I don't allow interference with my plans to go unpunished."

Alan saw the futility of appealing to the man's better nature; obviously he had none. It was apparent that he was determined to put Jessica not only to a dreadful death, but to the mental torture of knowing beforehand precisely how and when she was to die. Alan sank back in his chair exhausted. There was nothing that he could do to alleviate the suffering of this valiant girl whom he now realised he loved. Had he ever doubted this before, had he feared that his feeling for her might be merely a natural attraction caused by her beauty, he knew now that his love was no passing whim but a deep, vital emotion which would not change. All her actions, her marvellous self-control, her personal dignity in the face of the many humiliations to which she was subjected in that house, all bound him to her irrevocably. And now that he had found her, now that he had realised his love, he knew that it was all too late. She was to die at the hands of this foul brute, die so soon and in such a manner that it would never be possible for her to know his secret. Alan closed his eyes so as to prevent the tears which welled up in them from becoming discernible, but even as the anguish in his soul was rapidly turn-

ing to a fury of loathing for his tormentor, the suave voice spoke once more:

"Perhaps you are wondering at the instructions which I have so recently given Bert. You may be surprised that I have told him to fetch the aëroplane. You may think that there is a risk in doing so, collecting it from so far away." He laughed shortly. "I am afraid that I must plead guilty to having deceived you, Squire. When first I brought you here, I had not quite made up my mind as to my course of action in the near future, but now I realise that I must leave the country without very much delay. The method of my leaving concerns you and your aëroplane, but I will go into that later. The point that may be giving you hope is that Bert will have to bring the machine from a distance of . . . now, let me see. You were driven in the car for about an hour, weren't you? Shall we say thirty miles from where you landed? My friend, I am sorry. Banish the hope. There is a risk certainly, but not the risk of thirty miles. Two or three at the outside. Your little motor drive took you round and round the countryside near the field in which we landed. The little plan was designed to make you think that you were being imprisoned in a house some distance away. A little precaution in case you should escape, but escape is impossible now, so that I think it would be best for me to tell you the truth. I hate deception."

He smiled cynically. Alan opened his eyes.

"I had surmised exactly what you intended me to surmise," he said, with hopelessness in his heart.

"Of course you had," said the Sinister Individual.

"It was the natural, indeed the obvious conclusion to come to. Now let me see. Let us work out the programme for my last day in this country. To-morrow we shall——"

His voice was cut off short. Alan, who had been staring at the dog sitting at its master's feet, looked up to see what had caused him to cease so abruptly, and involuntarily sat upright, for the man's whole demeanour had changed. His face bore an expression of startled watchfulness. His muscles were taut, ready for instant movement. He breathed twice: "The signal." He seemed to be staring at the far end of the room, and Alan, by screwing his head round as far as he was able, managed to see that a small, red lamp which he had not noticed hitherto was shining out in the corner of the room. Even as he watched it—it faded out. But in the same moment the door was thrown open and Bert, a purposeful expression on his evil face, dashed into the room.

"The signal, sir."

"Yes," said the Sinister Individual, very quietly. "I saw it. I know. Got the frames down?"

"The men are doing it now, sir."

"Then to their stations!"

"Yes, sir. They are well trained; they know."

"Good! You, yourself, are ready?"

"For any emergency, sir."

"Excellent!"

He seemed now to be his old sinister self once more, quite composed, in full possession of his nerves. But the momentary glimpse which Alan had caught, startled like any other human being opposed in some way, comforted the youth. For if this man

could be so alarmed, then he was human, which his success and apparent omnipotence had almost made Alan doubt. But his next words dispelled any hope that Alan may have felt.

"You see now," came the suave voice, "certain of my precautionary measures put to the test. Someone, possibly more than one person who has no business here, has approached this house. I wonder who it can be? Surely not Brand so soon? Anyway someone is approaching. They have crossed the line of invisible rays which completely surrounds my domain at some distance from the house. When this machinery, a very clever machinery designed, I believe, originally as a sort of burglar alarm"—here he laughed sardonically—"is set in motion no one can approach without my knowing it. You heard me talk of frames. I will explain that a little later. Perhaps you are wondering why I am keeping you here and what I am going to do with both of you. Let me put an end to your bewilderment."

So saying he darted forward and quickly untied the bonds which held Jessica to her chair: Alan at the same time felt the man Bert do likewise for him; then under the menace of two automatics the prisoners were herded out of the room, across the hall, and down a passage. Halfway down they were told to stop. Covered by Bert's revolver they could do nothing but watch the Sinister Individual bend down and touch some spot in the skirting of the wall. Immediately part of the latter fell back, revealing a secret door, and Alan realised that he had just witnessed the actuation of a hidden spring.

Quickly they were both thrust through into a

small room in which a cheerful fire was burning brightly. It was furnished as luxuriously as that from which they had just come. Into the room came the Sinister Individual, followed by his dog. Then, with a quickness which could only have been born of long practice, Alan and Jessica were thrown into two chairs and bound as before so that they could scarcely move a finger.

"Right!" said the Sinister Individual, the task completed. "All is well. To your post, Bert."

The man hastily obeyed the order and left the room. Standing by the fireplace the Sinister Individual pressed what appeared to be a bell, but this was no bell, as Alan immediately realised, for the moment the button was pressed the door closed as silently as it had opened.

"This room," said their captor, with a quiet smile, "is sound-proof. You should be thankful to me that I have made it so, otherwise there would have been the painful necessity of gagging you both. It has other advantages. It can, as you see, only be entered by that secret door, which I defy anybody to locate. This room I have christened the Lost Room for a very good reason: it is shown in no architect's plan of the building, it could not be found unless the place were burned to the ground, or some other catastrophe occurred. It is concealed in a space which, I suppose, could be located, but this would prove a very difficult matter. Rather neat, I think. But this is neater still."

So saying he unloosed from its hook and placed over his head an apparatus which looked like the ordinary earphones of some wireless set.

"By means of this little house telephone," he remarked, "I am kept in touch with the doings of my men in the house. A fellow is told off to report to me fairly frequently; if necessary I can reply to him and give him my instructions. Ah! The man is about to speak, I see. Pray don't make too much noise. I will tell you what goes on should it be a matter which will interest you."

He paused, and remained quite still, evidently listening. Alan and Jessica, dazed by the perfection of this incredible man's precautions against unexpected attack, could do nothing but stare at him, almost hanging on his next words.

"Oh!" he said, very quietly. "How interesting! It is Brand, yes, and a friend. He has just been introduced? His name is Captain Burns. Do you know him? Ah, I see you do. They have somebody else with them. Who is it? Ah, yes, the local inspector of police, a man named Walker, a fool. What are they doing? What are they coming here for? Ah, the howling of the dog." He laughed dryly. "A pleasant little touch, I think. It took me some time to train that dog to howl whenever I chuckled, but it is a good idea; it keeps people away from this wood at night. Rather important to me; it's amazing how superstitious country folk are, quite amazing. They go out occasionally with guns to try to shoot the dog. Silly of them, very silly of them, but unless they hear the sound and the few adventurous spirits go out to see if they can shoot whatever is making it, the wood is always deserted. Really quite useful. It makes the last part of the journey which my men have to take when they are bringing in—

specimens, shall we say?—so much easier. Yes, Brand is talking about the howl.He evidently doesn't believe the local stories that he has heard. And I don't blame him. He's no fool. He is now asking to go round the outhouses. Well, why not? Yes, I see. Bert, you have done very well. I congratulate you. If that aëroplane had been in by now the situation might have been a little more awkward than it is. But at present I don't think there's much to fear. Yes. They are going round the outhouses, are they? Splendid! I hope they find something interesting. Ah, you will let me know when they have gone. Right!" He looked up. "Very interesting," he went on. "That fellow Brand must have quite remarkable powers of intuition and deduction. I had no idea that he would come here so soon. Well, it only goes to prove that I was right when I said that the pace was getting too hot: I am glad that I am staying here only until the day after to-morrow."

He paused; evidently the man reporting to him was speaking once more.

"Ah, they are standing by the wall. Splendid! What is that? Brand has asked to go in, and what has Bert said? Only too delighted? How very funny! Is he really going in at this moment? Good gracious! How delightful!"

He laughed harshly. Alan could not understand what was happening. For a moment he had the awful fear that once inside that walled-in space Brand and Andrew would be destroyed in cold blood. But the Sinister Individual's next words relieved him of that dread.

"He has gone in and taken just one little glance

round. He has examined nothing. Splendid, that was sensible of him, although he didn't know it. Something might have happened to him. Something unpleasant and unexpected if he had. He just saw the frames, thought he was looking at my cucumbers. How very funny! He has gone out. Bert has locked the door. He is going now? Oh, splendid! Bert's just seeing him off the premises I suppose? That's right. Yes, good."

He took the mechanism from his ears.

"In a few moments," he said, "Bert will come here to report to me. You will then be taken back to your cellars which I have made as comfortable as I have been able to in the short time at my disposal. There you will be left until to-morrow. I shall require you then. You"—he turned to Alan—"because I shall have to explain my little plan, and you"—he turned to Jessica, and his tone did not change one jot from the quiet, suave intonation which he always assumed—"because you are to be the thirtieth, the last for my collection. I hope you will sleep well, good lady, I hope you will sleep well."

Alan could have screamed with horror, could have yelled for Brand to come back and save them. But he knew it was useless, he knew that they were hopelessly in the power of this fiend who stood there tormenting them. There was nothing to be done.

Just then there came a noise at the wall and the door opened silently. Bert stood in the doorway.

"It's all right, sir. All clear. They've gone."

And with this information went Alan's last hopes.

CHAPTER XXI

IT WAS early morning. Dawn had come an hour or two before and the sun was now well clear of the horizon.

Detective Inspector Brand, fully dressed, walked across the passage of the inn and knocked loudly on the door opposite his own. A sleepy voice bade him enter, and opening the door he moved across to the bed where Andrew, scarcely awake, lay blinking up at him.

"Time to get up," said Brand shortly.

He walked over to the windows and drew the curtains, letting in the morning light. Taking a chair he sat down. Andrew, meanwhile, had dispelled the muzziness of his sudden awakening and was sitting upright in bed.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Just gone six, Captain."

"We're early, aren't we?" remarked Andrew with a wry smile.

"Yes," said Brand, "we are. Early rising better than an apple a day. Anyway couldn't help myself this morning. Walker came in."

"Oh!"

Andrew jumped from his bed and set himself to the task of shaving.

"Any news?"

"Yes," said Brand.

He did not continue, however, and Andrew, his face covered with shaving soap, looked round in surprise. But the look on the inspector's face forbade any questions. Brand was frowning, evidently deep in thought.

"Something," said Andrew to himself, "has gone wrong. It always does seem to go wrong in this loathsome business. I wonder what it is now?"

In spite of his curiosity, however, he refrained from questioning his friend, but quietly continued shaving with the razor which he had borrowed from the kindly innkeeper on the previous evening, when they had suddenly decided to remain in the locality for the night.

Abruptly Brand spoke.

"We were right to stay down here last night," he said slowly. "You might as well know all that has happened. First thing, there's been another disappearance. Afraid I should call it murder. Same circumstances precisely as have attended all the other disappearances. Dang it! Wish they'd told me before about that howling beast."

He spoke with such venom that Andrew realised, as he had not done on the previous night, that Brand's intuition must have given him some knowledge which he had missed. The inspector was obviously ruffled, and a ruffled Brand was a strange spectacle in view of his usual ever-present calm. That howl which they had heard had told the inspector something, of that Andrew felt certain, something which was leading him hot on the trail which they had been following with apparently so little suc-

cess. But Andrew knew better than to ask the inspector for any details. The man would himself volunteer information just as soon as he was so inclined and not one moment sooner. The effect of a question, Andrew felt sure, would merely be to shut him up like an oyster.

"Where did it happen?" at last ventured Andrew.

"Quite near. Pretty girl as usual, young as usual."

"I suppose," said Andrew, with rather a shaky laugh, "that all the villages around are full of the story of the howling beast?"

"Probably," said Brand. "Doesn't interest me now what they think."

"No clues?" suggested Andrew.

"Not a smell of one, but I knew this would happen. It isn't really what worries me."

"Oh!" said Andrew, surprised. "Well, then, what does?"

He had finished shaving and proceeded to wash his face quickly, after which he set about the process of dressing while he listened to the inspector.

"Araminta's gone," remarked Brand.

Andrew looked round startled.

"What?"

"Araminta," said Brand, "has gone. Most distressing."

Andrew straightened himself and stared at his friend.

"I don't quite understand," he murmured. "How has she gone?"

"God knows," replied Brand, "I don't, neither does the policeman who was left in charge. All he knows about it is that Walker sent a fellow, acting

on my instructions, to relieve the sergeant and his men. He was left alone merely to see that inquisitive yokels did not harm the machine. Think he must have fallen asleep. He doesn't admit it, but he was certainly put to sleep."

"A sock on the jaw?" asked Andrew.

"No sock on the jaw. Drug of some sort. Something fairly powerful, because he was still unconscious when they found him about an hour ago. We brought him round, but all the fellow could tell us was that he was sitting there under the fuselage when suddenly he was overpowered in the darkness and a wet evil-smelling handkerchief shoved over his mouth and nose. Says he could not see anybody or anything, thought there was more than one man. That's about all he can say."

"Thoroughly observant fellow," remarked Andrew with a smile.

"Don't know that you can blame him," said Brand. "You wouldn't observe much in the same circumstances. Still it's annoying."

"And no sign of Araminta at all?"

"Absolutely none. Wiped off the face of the earth as far as we are concerned. Sorry about it. Alan Squire will be annoyed."

The mention of his friend's name struck Andrew with a thrill of apprehension.

"When we get at him," he amended.

"We'll get at him all right," said Brand. "At least I think so. It is not he they're after. As a matter of fact the disappearance of Araminta rather goes to prove that he is all right. No aëroplane left the vicinity last night by air."

The purport of his words suddenly dawned on Andrew. Brand evidently thought that as long as Araminta was of value somebody who could pilot her—and the obvious person was Alan—was of equal importance to whosoever it might be who held them in his power. This was comforting, one of the first comforting facts that had come to them in the course of the investigation. But with it there came another thought, a disquieting thought: if, as Brand suggested, the disappearance of Araminta was good from the point of view of Alan, it could not be said to be good from the point of view of Jessica. If they were not after Alan, then they were certainly after the girl. Alan was with Jessica, at least that was the only surmise they could come to, when he had been captured, and in all probability the man the police were striving to track, the man who was behind all these foul murders, had evidently intended to seize only Jessica. The fact of Alan being with her had caused the necessity of taking him as well.

Andrew's brow furrowed into a deep frown as he thought of those blue eyes, those rose-petal cheeks. He had completed dressing now and he looked at Brand, who had not spoken for a few minutes. The latter, however, suddenly emerging from his brown study and seeing that his companion was fully attired, rose to his feet.

"Come on," he said. "Some breakfast."

He led the way downstairs to the parlour wherein they had eaten their supper on the previous evening. Mine host was busying himself with the final preparations for their breakfast, having evidently been

warned by Brand as to their requirements. They sat down to an excellent repast. At a sign from Brand the landlord left them alone and shut the door. Almost immediately the inspector turned to his friend.

"Look here, Captain," he said, "there isn't very much that you can do to-day. I have got to go along and see what there is to be done about this latest disappearance, but from what I know of the others there won't be anything to be done. There won't be a clue of any sort. They say so already, but I suppose I have got to go there. It's a matter of form. There are also one or two things I want to do down here anyway. I don't like to leave the locality. I have a hunch that our friends Miss Jessica and Mr. Squire aren't too far away. But you, Captain, you have got your duties to do at the aërodrome."

Andrew interposed here.

"I have," he said, "but they can be put off. I am pretty free, you know. I can easily stay."

The inspector smiled.

"I know you want to, Captain," he said. "It's easy to see that you are all out to help, and thank you. But you can't do anything. You can only sit around moping or come around with me and you might distract me. Sorry, but you know what I mean. You get along, Captain, back to your work. Take the machine which brought us down back to the aërodrome. I'll promise anyway to keep you posted as to anything that happens."

Andrew was reluctant to go, but he realised that Brand had spoken only the truth. There was nothing really that he could do to help. He had his

responsibility to his pupils and he ought to return, of that there was no doubt. He knew that if it had been of importance to stay he would have let his pupils and any other matters he was concerned with at the aërodrome slide, but there was no real excuse to remain, especially as Brand had told him in so many words that he might be a deterrent rather than a help in the investigation.

"Very well, Inspector," he remarked. "I'm sorry, but I see you are right. You will let me know though, won't you? Give me a ring at lunch time."

"Can't promise to do that," replied Brand. "Give you a ring to-night, anyway. Don't know where I'll be, you see."

Andrew smiled.

"Yes. I quite understand. All right, to-night without fail."

"To-night without fail," agreed the inspector.

As soon as they had completed their meal Brand took Andrew to the aërodrome where they had landed on the previous evening, in the police car which had been placed by Walker at his disposal. Brand remained there until Andrew had risen from the ground and was a mere speck in the sky on his homeward journey. The inspector then directed the chauffeur to drive him to the scene of the latest outrage.

It was as he had expected. There was nothing to be done. There were signs of a struggle, ominous stains of blood, signs which he had grown accustomed to expect, but that was all. Of finger prints, of all the usual aids to the detection of crime, in

fact, there was none. The deed appeared to have been committed clumsily, yet when examined, when a search was made for a sign of its perpetrator, Brand could only admit, as he had been forced to admit so often before, that this murder had been executed by a man or men of experience and intelligence.

Brand was there for less than an hour. He went through his usual routine, but he was satisfied long before he actually left that he would find nothing, that the crime bore the unmistakable marks of all the others which had preceded it. At last he departed, leaving the unravelled mystery in charge of Inspector Walker, and returned to the police station. There he found that the sergeant had collected all the reports which had come in on the night before. No one could be found who had actually seen the aëroplane land; only two had seen the machine in the air, although several had heard it. These two, farmhands well-known as good characters in the district, maintained that they had seen Araminta flying very low and that they were certain there had been two men in the machine. Beyond that they were not prepared to go. The machine had come down some way from them: one of them had decided that it was no business of his and had continued his work, but the other had set off to see if it had been a forced landing and whether he could give any help. It had taken him some time to locate the machine, and when he had finally succeeded he had found it deserted. It was this man who had first reported Araminta's descent to the police.

"Hm," said Brand, when he had sifted all this evidence. "Not much here, I'm afraid."

"No, sir," replied the sergeant. "I'm sorry, sir. It's a curious case, isn't it, sir?"

"Very curious," agreed Brand. "Most curious. How's the man who got drugged?"

"Better, sir. He's in bed at his home."

"Better stay there," said Brand, "until he feels quite well again. Doctor seen him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good!"

For a moment Brand was silent; then he looked up suddenly at the homely face of the sergeant.

"Look here, Sergeant," he said, quietly. "Last night Inspector Walker mentioned something about a farm around here run by a fellow called Green. Said he had a nickname or something."

Brand gave the appearance of being unable to remember precisely what had been told him, and the sergeant was quick to provide the information.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Green, sir. Known as the hungry farmer, sir."

"Hungry farmer! That's it, that's it. Why?"

The sergeant laughed.

"He's not very serious about his farm, sir," he said. "Leastways that's what is said round here. He's got a lot of money: came here about a year ago: treats his farm as a sort of occupation, I think, not as a money-making proposition. He treats all his men well: gives them a lot of money and he feeds them right royally. That's why he's called the hungry farmer. Buys so much grub, begging your pardon, sir . . . food."

Brand smiled.

"So it's a good job to get, is it, work on that farm?"

"Very good job, sir, but nobody around here gets it."

"Oh," said Brand. "How's that?"

"Well, sir . . . Mr. Green brought down all the hands he wanted. Aren't many, really. About half a dozen I should think."

"Five," interrupted Brand.

"Five, are there, sir? You know better than I do. He brought them down with him when he settled here. They have stayed with him ever since. They keep very much to themselves, come in for a drink occasionally to the pub at night, not often though. I think he gives them plenty of drink up at the farm. They don't mix much, not a very prepossessing lot, sir. But they all appear to be very devoted to Mr. Green and he to them. He's never had any casual work done by anybody round the district, sir."

"Curious cove," remarked Brand. "Not very popular, I shouldn't think?"

"No, sir. You're right, sir, he isn't exactly popular, but he's not unpopular if you know what I mean. He is—well, he keeps to himself, sir. Quiet gentleman."

"I see," said Brand. "Do you know where he gets his stores?"

"Yes, sir. Round the shops here."

"Yes, yes, I know. But which shops?"

"Well, sir," the sergeant grinned, "you see, sir, there are only one or two. Gets most of his stuff at the store three doors down."

"Sorry," said Brand. "I understand. I think I'll just go for a bit of a walk. If anything comes in, Sergeant, when I am out, anything you think I ought to know, you'll find me at the store."

"Very good, sir."

Brand left the building, turned to his right, and walked down the street until he found the store. This he entered, and taking the manager aside revealed his identity. After enjoining the man to silence he then put a few questions to him and in a very few minutes was in possession of an accurate list of the foodstuffs supplied to Mr. Green within the last few weeks. Together, Brand and the manager examined the shop's books very carefully, and when the inspector realised the complete quantity he whistled softly. The manager looked at him.

"It is surprising, isn't it? He's known as the hungry farmer around here."

"Yes," said Brand, "I have heard it. A very hungry farmer, I should say."

"Well, he does us no harm," the man laughed. "If we had a few more customers like him I'd be opening up branch stores in some other villages. Perhaps Salisbury itself!"

Brand smiled.

"I have no doubt you would, my friend. Well, thank you very much, but remember . . . not a word of this."

Brand returned to the police station, retired to the inner office, and informed the sergeant that he desired to be alone. As soon as his subordinate had departed, closing the door behind him, Brand buried

his face in his hands and concentrated on all the data which he had obtained.

Some time later he withdrew the automatic from his pocket and looked at it fondly.

"I wonder," said the inspector, softly, to his weapon, "I wonder if I am going to have reason to use you soon, old pal?"

CHAPTER XXII

WALKER returned just before lunch and Brand had the meal with him in the inn next door. Walker reported that he had been able to find out nothing which would lead them to the discovery of the truth with regard to the strange disappearance of the girl on the previous evening, and the disordered appearance of the room with its ominous stains.

"It's just another of them, sir," he said with a hopeless look in his eyes. "Just another of them. Not a clue, nothing. There's only one thing that can be said with certainty and that is that it isn't merely a disappearance—it's a murder."

"I know," said Brand, soothingly, "I know, but I believe, Inspector, we are not far off the truth at last."

Walker looked at him with a new interest.

"What! Got a clue, sir?"

"I don't know," said Brand. "It's a bit early to say anything definite yet, but I must confess that I am more hopeful at this moment than I have been since the show started."

"Pray God, sir, that you are right; pray God, sir, that you are on the right track."

The vehemence of the inspector's outburst took Brand rather by surprise, but he sympathised with the local man. Walker certainly had a most unenviable job, inspector of the police in the very

centre of all the undiscovered crimes, the laughing-stock probably of the entire countryside because of his failure to arrest the fiend behind these terrible outrages.

"Well, Inspector," Brand remarked, "don't let's talk about it now. I have always found that when one is very much worried about anything for a considerable time, it does a great deal of good to relax and forget all about it for a bit. Come along now. Tell me about the local cricket team: done any good lately?"

By the end of the meal Brand had, by dint of careful coaxing, got Walker out of the depressed condition in which he had started it. Brand knew well the value of morale, and Walker's morale had ebbed very low in the past few weeks. It was with a feeling of satisfaction that he rose finally from the table, a feeling that he had been able to restore, to a certain extent, his subordinate's self-confidence. They returned to the police station, and once inside the inner office Walker turned to his chief.

"What are your plans, sir?"

Brand smiled and shrugged his shoulders, an expressive gesture.

"Don't know," he said at last. "Well, do know to a certain extent. I know what I am going to do in the immediate future but after that . . . my actions will be dictated by the circumstances which may arise. For the moment, Inspector, I want you to remain close to this station so that if I have to send you a message suddenly, urgently, you won't be difficult to find. And what's more I want your entire staff, all the constables that you can get hold

of, to remain in this station until further orders. Except those actually on duty, of course. Sort of confined to barracks. Got me?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you don't get any message by twelve o'clock to-night, then disperse, but be here again and follow the same routine to-morrow from early morning. If by midday to-morrow you have heard no word from me ring up Scotland Yard and see if I have gone back to London. If I haven't, well for God's sake don't be long coming after me. I may be anywhere, but look first in Mr. Green's farm."

Walker looked at his superior with some astonishment.

"In Mr. Green's farm, sir? Where we went last night?"

"That's the place," said Brand, quietly. "That's the place. If I disappear as those girls have disappeared, you go directly to that farm and pull it down, if necessary, in order to find me. See?"

Walker did his best to overcome his surprise.

"Yes, sir. I understand your orders, sir. But I must say, sir, Mr. Green, why he's been here a year. He's . . ."

"I don't care if he's been here a hundred years," interrupted Brand. "I don't care if he was born of royal blood and has borne an impeccable character for the whole duration of the world. It doesn't interest me. You just do as I say."

"Very good, sir." Walker spoke in his official voice again.

Brand looked at his watch. It was close on three.

"Well, so long. You know what to do?"

"Everything that you have said will be done, sir. Don't you worry."

"Right," smiled Brand, "I shan't worry."

He went off whistling down the street, but he had not gone far out of the village before he ceased his whistling and carefree movements; of a sudden all his actions became covert and furtive and he looked around him to see whether he was observed, but no one was in sight. He walked now very quietly and rapidly along the side of the road, almost in the ditch, arriving eventually at a small gate which led into the wood which he had examined in the company of Andrew on the previous night. With the same unerring instinct for silence he moved quickly until he was lost to sight from the road in the undergrowth. He then stopped and listened very carefully. For some time he remained motionless in this position, but at last he was satisfied that no one was following him. He went a hundred yards or so farther into the wood, and then stopped still, repeating his former actions. Satisfied once more that nobody was shadowing him he proceeded some way until he was in the heart of the wood. Here he stopped but did not remain motionless as before: instead he retraced his steps with amazing agility but without making a single sound.

When he had almost reached the place of his second stoppage he crouched under a bush and waited motionless. For nearly half an hour he remained in the same position; then he rose and stretched himself luxuriously.

Detective Inspector Brand at last was satisfied. He was certain, as certain as a man could be, that

no one had followed him into the wood. He moved now with less caution, but still very silently, in the direction in which he knew Green's farm to lie. As he walked he talked to himself.

"Now then, Brand, my lad, they were ready for you when you called there last night. When I say 'they' you know whom I mean. The people who were meant to be seen. Not those who weren't. Why were they ready for you? How did they know you were coming? Not through any fault of your own, I'll wager. You were pretty silent and so were your companions. They couldn't have heard you coming. No. Very well, then, they must have known. Some signal, some alarm signal. Just be careful, have a look where you are going."

Brand suited the action to the word. He looked about him very carefully as he approached the fringe of the wood, but of warning signal, of any bell wire, he could find no sign.

"The odds are," he said to himself, "that in the day-time there isn't any signal. In fact, when you come to think of it, it must be so, for in the day-time Green's farm is open to any casual visitor; if anybody should happen to come they can't be having that signal working the whole time. They'd be frightening themselves out of their lives every minute of the day. Now let me see. If there's an alarm it isn't going now, but as soon as things begin to happen in that farm it will be set. Right. Assuming that things don't begin to happen until after nightfall you've got some hours yet before you need secrete yourself somewhere in the outhouses. There's one important point and only one as far as I can see. That is that

you get within the signal, within the radius, before it is set. Then they won't know you are there. Yes, not a bad idea. I must see about that. I will. Wood's getting a bit thin. Better stop for a moment."

He did stop. He sat down on a tree trunk knowing full well he was still far enough away to be unobserved from the farm. But on the other hand, he could see it fairly well; he observed one or two men moving about apparently carrying out the ordinary routine duties of farmhands on a busy farm.

"Funny," said Brand to himself suddenly. "Very funny."

He looked about him again, took up a pair of field-glasses which he had purloined from the police station, and examined the farm carefully through the lenses.

"Very funny," he repeated to himself. "No chickens. I have never seen a farm without chickens before in my life. Wonder why? Oh, I see. Might be that, of course. Chickens when disturbed at night do make a ghastly noise. Perhaps things happen which might disturb them and neighbours might wonder why there was this terrible noise at night. Course that's only an idea. But it's funny. Busy farm, no chickens."

Brand suddenly felt hungry. He drew from his right-hand coat pocket, where it had been nestling with his automatic, a small paper packet. From this he took a chunk of cheese and two pieces of bread.

"Glad I thought of this," he said to himself. "Might as well have my tea now."

He looked at his watch. It was approaching five.

"Thought so," said Brand. "Realised I felt famished. Wonder if it would be better to keep them for a bit. No. Sun will go down fairly soon. Have to get active before then."

He made cheese sandwiches out of his rations and soon demolished them. Then he looked once more at the farm.

"Wonder if I dare smoke a cigarette?" he asked of himself. "Yes, no reason why I shouldn't. Long way in the wood really. They haven't the slightest idea I am here. Come on, then."

He pulled out his case and lit one. Inhaling luxuriously he enjoyed his smoke to the full, then carefully extinguishing the stump he set himself to watch the farm for a little longer before the time came for action.

"Of course you are taking a risk, old lad," he murmured softly to himself. "A second visit from Detective Inspector Brand would not, I think, be appreciated very much. In fact I am not at all sure that if you had been alone last night you would have got out of that farm. All supposition, but still I have got a hunch. Like hunches. Hunches have done me well in the past."

He gazed almost longingly at the farm.

"Like action," he said. "Especially when it promises so much. By Gosh, it will be a good feather in the cap of old Brand when he gets this through! Do hope you are right, old lad. Shan't stop congratulating you for a week. Shouldn't be surprised if the commissioner himself sent for you. Hey, stop these thoughts, get on with the job."

It was time to move. There was still a good hour

of daylight, yet Brand knew very well that the alarm would be set just as soon as the ordinary every-day visitor to the farm could no longer be expected and the hands had come in from the fields. He could see one or two of the men throwing up their work and coming in even now.

Brand decided that the risky part of the performance must be done quickly. He moved forward between the ever-thinning trees furtively, using every piece of cover with great skill as he approached the outbuildings of the farm. One of these, a hay-loft, stood only a few yards from the fringe of the wood, and with a quick run, bent double, he reached it. He remained, flattened against its side quite motionless, listening intently for any sound, but there was none and he drew a great sigh of relief: apparently he had not yet been observed, and the most difficult part of his journey was over. Making his way carefully between the buildings, but always keeping one of them between himself and the windows of the house, he at last arrived at the back of the stables.

There was a door in front of him. Very carefully and softly he opened it and peeped through: he was in what he surmised was an addition to the stables, and steps, presumably to another hay-loft, stood in front of him. Quickly Brand slid through and closed the door. Running up the steps he found himself in a loft only partially filled with hay.

"Ah!" said Brand to himself, "just the place I was looking for."

Taking great care not to alter appreciably the position of the hay, he secreted himself beneath a large bed, covering his retreat with the loose hay

all around, and was soon out of sight from prying eyes.

Detective Inspector Brand spent a most uncomfortable two hours, but at the end of that time, which he noted carefully by his wrist watch, he judged that it must by now be dark outside. As silently as possible he removed his covering of hay, shaking off as much as he was able from his clothes, in the darkness. He dared not show a light but crept to the top of the steps, descending them soundlessly. Once on the ground he moved rapidly to where he knew the door to be, and opened it gently.

He was right. The sun had sunk below the horizon some time before, and Brand was relieved to see that the sky was overcast and the night a very dark one. He slipped out and looked around him, his one fear being that a watch-dog might betray his presence; but suddenly he remembered with thankfulness that on the preceding night when, out of the darkness, accompanied by Andrew and Walker, he had called so unexpectedly on Mr. Green, no dog had forewarned the farmer of their approach.

He became more daring and made a rapid survey of all the outbuildings. There was nothing unusual to be found. Cattle were housed in long, low sheds. There were various carts under an open but roofed-in building, and he found himself at last on the far side of the place which had given him shelter. This he presumed was the stables proper. It had been locked on the previous evening, but Brand decided to try the door. After all he had only Green's word for it that the place had been locked,

and although he had no reason to doubt the man's assertion, still he was not prepared to leave anything to chance.

To his surprise the door opened immediately as he moved the latch. Brand let himself in and closed the door behind him. He expected to hear the restless movement of horses sensing a strange presence, but none came to his ears. Moving forward carefully he came suddenly against a hard substance which made him jump back in alarm. Nothing happened, no sound broke the silence. He put out one hand and his fingers came into contact with something which resembled wood. It was not very wide but quite long, and had apparently a polished surface. Brand slid his hand down it and came to a cone-shaped metal nozzle. Astonished he stepped forward and felt further along, and then in a flash the truth dawned on him. His hand had come in contact with the unmistakable mechanism of an engine. He had found Araminta!

Brand leant up against the fuselage and gave himself up, for a few minutes, to intense thought. He was extremely excited, but would allow himself no time for congratulations at this proof of the correctness of his hunch, the accuracy of his deductions. For the presence of Araminta in that stable established conclusively that Mr. Green was not all that his appearance suggested. It proved without doubt that Brand was hot on the trail of the fiend whom he had been chasing for so long.

Brand's hand subconsciously flew to his pocket and gripped his automatic. He was near to action: he knew it and was delighted at the prospect; Inspector

Brand was one of those who thrive on danger, one whose reckless courage had in the past done as much for his advancement in his profession as had his powers of reasoning and his amazing hunches.

He did not remain long in that stable. Araminta had told him all that she could tell him—that he was on the right track. He patted her nozzle affectionately and murmured a few words of thanks. He laughed at himself for this weakness; but he was nervous, and he could not deny it.

"Steady, old chap," he said under his breath. "Steady, old lad! You are very near to the biggest success you have ever had. Now don't go and fool it by some silly move. What next? The house, I think, and pretty soon."

He moved silently to the door, as silently let himself out and closed it, then like a fleeting shadow he was across the intervening space and up against the wall of the house. As he stood there, from just beside him there suddenly blazed out a light from the window of the room which he had entered on the previous night. Somebody had obviously just come into it.

Brand crept along the wall on his hands and knees until he was just below the window. Very silently, very carefully he raised himself by inches only until his eyes came on a level with the sill. He looked into the room.

At a desk in front of a blazing fire a man was sitting, a man dressed entirely in dark clothes, with as sallow and evil a face as any Brand had ever seen. At once his thoughts flew back to his own office, to an interview he had had there with Alan Squire

when the latter had described to him his strange visitor at the flat.

"Golly," said Brand, to himself, "and then Golly again."

His glance travelled to the fireplace, to the rug just before it. He saw there a great wolfhound curled up, apparently asleep. Brand whistled to himself.

"Gosh," he said.

But a sudden movement of the man at the desk riveted his attention. The fellow had glanced up, was looking at the door. Quickly Brand followed the direction of his eyes. The door had just been opened and a figure he knew well entered, his hands strapped behind his back and on his white face a look of agony. Behind him there came another figure which Brand also recognised, that of the man Green whom he had met before. This man held an automatic pressed against the small of Alan Squire's back. He was forcing him forward, forcing him to the table, but Brand only spared him one glance.

The inspector was fascinated by the expression on his young friend's face, horribly fascinated by the change which had come over it in the short time since he had seen him, for there was a wealth of fear, nay, terror in Alan's eyes which to Brand appeared as incredible as it was unexpected.

"Poor lad!" murmured the inspector to himself. "Poor lad! What in Hades have they been doing to make him like that? And . . . where's the girl?"

CHAPTER XXIII

FOR some moments Brand remained motionless, his eyes fixed intently on the scene before him. True, he had expected to see something of the sort, but such an amazing spectacle of brutal lawlessness he would not have believed possible in the present century. His first instinct was to smash his way through the window to release Alan. The element of surprise would be on his side . . . but Brand took a hold on himself.

"Now then, my lad," he murmured under his breath. "Don't get impulsive. It's not fitting at your age."

His next desire was to rush off immediately and obtain the aid of Walker and his country police; but here again wiser counsels prevailed. He knew that the alarm would by now most certainly be working, and he thought it most probable that a man leaving the farm would just as surely work it as one approaching. To depart would, therefore, clearly advertise his presence, so Brand realised that his best possible course of action was to lie low and see what he could see, hear what he could hear. Although for the moment Alan's plight might be uncomfortable, there was nothing to show that he was in any immediate danger. Should such a situation arise, then

Brand would know how to act, but in the meantime the best thing he could do was to remain unobserved but yet observing.

Nevertheless the inspector quietly withdrew the automatic from his pocket and fingered it lovingly. He had very little doubt that before the evening was over he would have cause to use it.

He watched the sinister figure seated at the desk and suddenly saw that the man's lips were moving. To Brand's great relief he found that he could hear every word, for the window under which he was crouching was slightly open at the top, thus making it possible for the sound of speech to reach him.

"Lucky," said Brand to himself.

But he wasted no more time on useless comment, giving all his attention to the conversation that was proceeding within that room.

"Please sit down." It was the suave voice of the grim figure behind the desk which he heard. "Thank you. Bert, kindly attend to him. That's right. Thank you."

Brand saw that Alan had been pushed into a chair in front of the desk and bound thereto in such a manner that he could not even move, far less escape.

"You may leave us, Bert."

The man whom Brand had known as Green turned on his heel and left the room, closing the door behind him.

For a few moments the sinister figure said nothing, but remained staring with a sort of malevolent hatred at the luckless Alan. Then, quietly, he began to speak; every word reached the crouching inspector outside.

"It was unfortunate," came the suave tones, "from your point of view, my dear friend, that you were in the company of Miss Jessica when I succeeded in apprehending her; but from my point of view it was most exceptionally fortunate. You and your Araminta have solved a problem to which I had given a lot of thought: the problem of my escape from this country. You will understand that the police have circulated a fairly accurate description of me throughout the land. It would, therefore, be very difficult for me to leave by any ordinary method. True, I might have disguised myself. I venture to think that I am quite a good hand at disguises, but . . . well, disguises are not always satisfactory and some little mannerism, something or other which perhaps marks me very clearly but of which I myself am not aware, might have given me away. On the other hand, if I leave in the passenger seat of your aëroplane from a neighbouring field—and there are plenty which would prove suitable—say in the early hours of to-morrow morning, with your tank full there should be very little trouble in taking me straight across the Channel and dropping me in some little spot in the north of France whence I can quite easily make my way to Paris or some other big city in which to lie low for a bit. Big cities are very convenient for that purpose: I wonder if you realise that? Take the tip from me: if you ever wish to avoid publicity go where there are most people, and most things, then you are almost certain not to be found."

He laughed, and his laugh struck a chill through Brand's heart as he crouched there, listening and

watching intently. There was something awful, something extraordinarily horrible in the sound; whereas a laugh should be the outward sign of enjoyment and happiness, this laugh seemed to contain the most sardonic and cynical elements, and there was nothing in the least humorous about it. It was mirthless and as coldly cruel as any sound Brand had ever heard before.

The voice suddenly continued.

"You do gather what I am getting at, don't you, Alan Squire? I shall require you to occupy the pilot's seat in your Araminta and to take me over to France. I may say that any interference with my plans will be disastrous to you, quite disastrous. I have told you before, I think, that I am not really afraid of death: in some ways I should welcome it now that I have completed, or so nearly completed, my collection, and by to-morrow morning, you must remember, I shall have completed it."

A tone of menace became apparent in his voice.

"On the other hand, I don't quite see why I shouldn't live. You must remember, when you are flying your machine to-morrow morning just after dawn, that your life depends entirely on whether you land me safely in France at a spot which I shall indicate. In case you should have any plan in your head or any idea should occur to you in the middle of our flight that you could in some manner accomplish my death without you yourself sharing my fate with me, please do not consider this idea for a moment. My men are faithful to me, very faithful to me. They have instructions that if I do not meet

them at a certain place in Paris at the beginning of next week, then they are to seek you out wherever you may be, and at whatever cost to them; they are to seek you out and put you to the death which you will see Miss Jessica suffer this very evening. I have decided that you are to witness the performance: it may act as a deterrent to you to-morrow."

He paused. Brand stared at him and noticed the cold, cynical expression on his face. In truth the idea was neat and the inspector could not refrain from admiring the man for the conceiving of it: it was in keeping with all his other actions.

"Dang it," said Brand to himself, "he'd have got away all right if it hadn't been for that howl. But . . . I am going to get him. Yes, sir, I am going to get him."

Once more his fingers lovingly caressed the automatic in his hand. From where he was hiding Brand could not see Alan's face, but he realised the mental torture which the poor lad must be undergoing and felt heartily sorry for him. He wished that in some way he could let Alan know of his presence, could give him that much hope, but there was none possible without grave risk. Any bravado on his part now would be sheer foolishness; any risk of detection might only result in his losing the chance which he now had of bringing successfully to an end the nefarious career of the sinister figure seated behind that desk.

"You may be wondering," went on the suave voice, "what will happen to you when you have successfully landed me in France. Well, my friend, once out of this country I am not in any fear of

capture. I shall not return to it, you see; it has too many displeasing associations. The woman whom I once loved with all my soul, the woman who has caused me to loathe and detest anything, any person who may remind me of her, any member of her sex in fact—that woman lived here in England. I have done with the country after to-night. I have taken my toll, I have registered my protest. I shall go now, disappear for good. I have the money. Once in France I am beyond the reach of the police. Never mind how, accept it only as a fact; be sure that I have powerful friends. When I have clambered from the machine onto the fair soil of France you may do as you please. I would suggest that you should take your Araminta to the nearest aërodrome, refuel, and set your nose once more towards England. I would suggest that you should get hold of your friend Brand and inform him of all that has happened: it will not hurt me and it will clear up a mystery. I hate mysteries: I should like this one cleared up."

There was something of arrogance in his tone. Brand smiled to himself at the thought of the rude shock which he would presently deliver to this conceited individual.

"I don't think there is anything I need tell you. Nothing more. If you have any questions perhaps you would like to ask them now. It will be your last opportunity before we set forth to-morrow."

He remained silent for a moment, then suddenly a rush of words came to Brand's ears. He hardly recognised Alan's voice in the piteous appeal which the youth was now making to the monster seated before him, a passionate supplication for Jessica's

life. Brand whistled softly to himself. For Alan to behave in this manner meant that the lad must have been through a very great deal, for Alan's nerves to have been shattered to such an extent proved that he must have suffered far more than Brand had imagined in the short time he had been a prisoner. But then, as the inspector listened, abruptly the tone changed; something must have told Alan that his appeal was useless, futile, in the face of the cold, stark cruelty of the sinister man facing him—a look in the eyes, perhaps, or the expression on his face. Alan had suddenly changed from pathetic entreaties to a volley of abuse, the like of which Brand had seldom heard, but which roused the inspector to excited admiration.

"Good boy!" he whispered to himself. "Good boy! That's the stuff!"

For some time the tall man remained silent; then he jumped to his feet with such an abrupt movement that it momentarily startled Brand and made him cower in the shadows for fear that he had been seen. The man almost ran round his desk and struck Alan a violent blow on the mouth.

"Here, you," growled Brand to himself: his hand holding the automatic crept upwards.

But the sudden moment of anger on the part of the sinister figure had passed. He retraced his steps, stood before the fireplace and laughed, that cold, mirthless, merciless laugh which had so appalled Brand not very long before. Then, quietly, he spoke:

"There are few men," he said, "to whom I have given so much licence with regard to expressions of opinion about myself. Still, what does it matter?

Call me what you will, my young friend, call me what you will; I don't care. My mind is inflexible, my will determined; that girl shall die, and die this very evening. She shall die in the manner which I have prescribed; she has been meddlesome, she has poked her pretty nose into things which do not concern her. That would not have mattered had they not concerned me, but they did: they have made the situation just a little awkward for me. That is unforgivable. That is punishable by a slow and painful death, precisely what she will receive."

He laughed again and, turning quickly, rang the bell beside the fireplace. The door was almost immediately opened and the man, Green, whom Brand had heard the Sinister Individual address as "Bert", entered: he must have been standing just outside awaiting such a summons. His master nodded towards Alan. It took his satellite about a moment of two in which to release Alan from his bonds and to rush him from the room. The door closed behind them.

The sinister man was alone. Brand wondered whether his moment had not come, whether he should not now creep into the room and make his capture. But he was in no hurry. Proof would come, no doubt, proof in plenty was to be found about that farm, within the house itself perhaps, proof that this man was the actual brain behind the many disappearances and murders which had taken place recently. Brand, however, wanted to catch him redhanded, to seize him without a chance of escape. His visit to that farm on the previous night had persuaded him that this master criminal's precau-

tions against unexpected attack were well-laid. Even now, when surprise would be in Brand's favour, he was not sure that some other method of depriving him of the fruits of his capture might not exist, might not be put into operation. Brand had not decided on any course of action; he preferred to keep an open mind on the subject for the moment and to watch, watch until he should see . . . what he should see.

Suddenly something occurred which made the inspector cower into the shadows of the wall beside him. The sinister figure had turned sharply and made towards the door which, as Brand knew from his visit on the previous evening, led to the paved path outside. Brand went through a bad moment: he wondered if he had committed some indiscretion, if he had been too daring and his presence was observed. But the thin figure of the man he was watching came out into the night and moved straight forward, evidently with some fixed purpose in view. The great hound had followed his master out of the room and was slinking behind him down the path. For a moment the inspector was transfixed with dread lest the dog should scent his presence and betray him, but quite unconcernedly the brute passed on in his master's footsteps.

Brand watched the man and the dog walking down the path towards the walled-in enclosure. As silently as a shadow of the night he followed. The man approached the door in the wall, turned a key in the lock and threw it open, passing through immediately and leaving the door ajar behind him. Very quietly Brand flattened himself against the wall and crept

along it. A moment or two later he was staring within.

A strange sight met his eyes. No longer were there frames all round, frames such as he had seen used for forcing vegetables, such as were covering the ground on the previous evening. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he saw that these frames were now piled up against the wall, while all around inside that enclosure there was no sign of a kitchen garden. Instead he saw many mounds in rows, mounds which reminded him for a moment of something he could not place; they seemed sinister and suspicious, stretching from wall to wall on either side of the centre path.

Brand whistled to himself. He was in the presence of evil. He could not be certain as to the full significance of those mounds, but already his quick brain had formed a good idea of what they represented. Of their suspicious nature he now had no doubt whatsoever: otherwise why should this man have been at such pains to conceal them underneath those frames the night before? But Brand had no more time for conjecture; he realised that the lanky form standing in the middle of that path was talking, talking softly as if to himself, but with a wealth of passion in his words.

"See what you have done, woman! I have taken my toll. Look around you, wherever you may be now. Look at the innocent victims of your sin."

His voice rose almost to a shriek.

"May you burn eternally, curse you. May you bear the tortures of the damned, *you* and your sex."

Brand stood bewildered. He had heard aright, of that he felt sure, but the words were so strange that the inspector was mystified. But only for a moment: suddenly an inkling of the truth dawned on him.

"Dash!" said Brand to himself. "May get off on a plea of insanity. Blast those lawyers, always trying to get people away from the gallows. He deserves to be hung about four times: he may only become an extra penny on the tax payers."

Brand grinned at his own grim jest, but his grin fled from his face instantly as he saw that his quarry had turned and was now approaching along the path. The inspector suddenly realised what had saved him from the attention of the hound in the first place, and he made good use of it now. The evening breeze was blowing westwards, and therefore diverting any scent which the dog might otherwise have caught of his presence. He cowered back a few paces and crouched to the ground in as dark a corner as he could find, carefully watching all the while the lanky form walk up the path, the dog at his heels. A moment later and they had both again entered the room.

He watched until the door was closed; then he moved with great rapidity to the door itself. Sidling along the wall he approached the window and looked in. He was just in time to see his quarry walk across the room, and his hand almost touch the handle of the door. Brand waited until he saw the door closing and then moved with great speed combined with silence, one of his greatest attributes as a police officer. He was through the door opposite him in a second, had closed it behind him and had crossed

the room in a few strides. Once there he hesitated for a moment only.

"Of course it's a risk," he said to himself. "Didn't you know you'd have to take risks? Get along with it!"

Noiselessly, with great caution, he opened the door an inch and found himself looking into a hall. There was a door opposite. Brand glided across the thick carpet and opened it just sufficiently to be able to see beyond. He was staring into a passage, which to his great relief he found to be lighted, for it removed any danger there might have been of a crack of light, showing from the lighted hall in which he stood, striking out into a dark corridor. Brand opened the door a little more and peeped through. He could now see along the passage and his eyes met a strange sight: the lanky figure was bending down, touching the skirting on the wall, and Brand whistled softly under his breath, for he saw an opening, the opening obviously of some secret door worked by some concealed mechanism, suddenly fall away in the wall just in front of his quarry. The latter went through accompanied by his hound, and the door swung to behind him.

Quickly and silently, his eyes marking the spot which he had seen touched to actuate the apparatus, Brand reached it almost as soon as it had closed. He paused only long enough to smile at the automatic clasped between the fingers of his right hand, then bending down he searched for the secret spring which worked the door. As he felt around feverishly suddenly a finger sank into the wall. Brand immediately drew himself erect, and as the opening in

the wall became large enough, he passed though with great rapidity and cast one glance around.

"Hands up, old dear," he remarked. "And just close this door behind me, will you? Thank you so much. Er . . . drop that pop-gun, please."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE secret door in the wall opened suddenly and a tall, sinister figure moved out of it. Behind him the door closed silently. The man walked quietly along the passage, opened the door of the study and closed it after him. Then moving over to the fireplace, the sallow-complexioned man, a curious light of triumph in his eyes, rang the bell.

It was answered almost immediately by the man who had passed as Farmer Green.

"Bert," came the suave tones of the sinister figure, "kindly bring the man Squire to me."

"Yes, sir."

The man disappeared on his errand, and while he was waiting the tall figure seated himself at the desk. A few minutes later the door was thrown open and Alan Squire entered, shepherded as usual by the automatic held in Bert's hand.

The sinister figure nodded towards the chair and it did not take Bert's practised fingers long to make his prisoner secure.

"Thank you. You may leave us."

The man left the room and closed the door. For a few moments the figure at the desk said no word. Then suddenly he looked up at his captive.

"Cheero, Alan; er . . . sorry I have been so long."

The voice was entirely different. The suave tones of the Sinister Individual had given place to the cheery, abrupt utterance of Detective Inspector Brand.

A remarkable change came over the prisoner in the chair. Into the dull hopelessness of his eyes there sprang a new light, into the slack listlessness of his posture there came a fresh alertness; but Alan Squire, sceptical and incredulous, said no word.

"Sorry I don't look like my old self," said Brand, quietly, a twinkle in his eyes. "Grease paint makes a lot of difference. Grease paint and clothes. Hope your host is comfortable. He's all trussed up and practically naked in his own secret room. Hope for his sake that I don't forget how to actuate that door, otherwise he might die of starvation, which wouldn't be a bad idea, would it?"

The inspector laughed.

"Come on, Mr. Squire, wake up. It's me all right."

Then and then only did Alan believe his senses.

"My God, Brand!" he cried.

But he was not allowed to proceed any further; the detective's hand stopped him with a gesture.

"Not so loud, old lad, not so loud. We are not out of the wood yet by any means, and that reminds me: there's no time to waste. All will be explained later, as they say in the story books. Your job is to get away from here at once. Through this door, out beyond the outhouses, straight into that wood. Make a note of where the moon is. Keep it in the same position and you will come out on the road not so very far from the village. When you get there sprint

for all you are worth to the police station. You can't miss it for you are right on the spot. Don't stop at the Rose and Crown on the way! Get hold of Walker, Inspector Walker. He'll be there waiting! Tell him to come along down here to this farm just as fast as he knows how. Not by the main road though, through the wood. Every man to be armed. Lots of handcuffs. If you want to see the fun you come back with them. Don't forget the moon: mustn't loose your way. Before you start back, however, ring up your friend Captain Burns, at the aërodrome, where he is waiting for a message from me. Tell him to get hold of Scotland Yard. He knows this farm. He can describe its exact locality to them. Tell him that I want the Flying Squad here just as fast as their blinking cars can go. No nonsense about it. He'd better come down with them. They'll be too late, I hope, to be in any fun, but still just as well if the first attack fails to have a reserve line coming up behind you. When you come back with the police, don't make a sound. Come up that path and into this room. If there is anyone in here with me burst in, otherwise come in silently. Remember silence is golden. Got all that?"

Alan was once more his old self. The call to action had completely rehabilitated his active brain, and every word Brand spoke was a word of hope, a word of miraculous succour which he had not dared to believe would come.

As he spoke Brand had risen and released Alan from his bonds. The youth stood up.

"Feeling stiff?" asked Brand.

Alan shook himself.

"No. By gosh, it's good to be free."

"Yes," said Brand soberly. "It will feel damn good to Miss Jessica too, and the sooner you come back with Walker and his lot the sooner she'll get the sensation."

Alan paused.

"Well, what's the matter now?" asked Brand, impatiently.

"Can't she come with me?" Alan asked. "You could manage it in the same way as you have done for me. Can't . . ."

"No," said Brand, shortly. "Sorry, but can't be helped. You are the only one I can let go. You can move faster through that wood, and a matter of minutes, even seconds, may decide this show. One of you has got to remain and she's the obvious one. Can't explain now. You get off and trust old Brand."

Silently the two men shook hands, then with all possible speed Alan Squire made off into the night. Brand smiled as he watched until he could no longer see him in the darkness.

"Good lad," he said to himself. "Good lad. Wish I felt really confident, though. Still, things are going well."

He closed the door and returned to the desk. He sat down and waited for the developments which he knew were about to occur. Suddenly from the far corner of the room straight in front of him a red light flashed out.

"Ah," said Brand, soberly, "that's how they knew. I wonder what works it?"

He got up rapidly and moved round the desk, laying himself down flat on the floor. Almost at once

the door was thrown open. Brand did not look up but he knew who had entered.

"My God!" cried a voice from the door, a voice which he recognised as that of Bert, alias Mr. Green.

Brand heard footsteps rushing towards him and then hands pulled him onto the armchair. The inspector acted his part perfectly: he opened his eyes and looked about him as if dazed, his hand crept to his chin and he rubbed it gently. Then quite suddenly, just as suddenly as a man does recover from a knock-out blow, he feigned to recover his senses. He looked up at Bert's startled face.

"What's happened, sir? The signal's gone and the man's no longer here."

"No," said Brand, slowly, once more in exact imitation of the suave tones which he had heard used by the Sinister Individual. "He's no longer here."

Then suddenly he leapt to his feet. He scowled ferociously, his voice when he spoke contained a new note, a note of vicious anger.

"What do you mean," he cried, "what do you mean by tying him so badly? I rose from my desk, I approached him to taunt him with the death of that girl downstairs, and he had an arm free before I knew what had happened."

Quickly he pretended to change his mood. Slowly his hand rose again to his chin.

"He can hit, can that youth! He was lucky perhaps: his aim was true the very first time."

The man, Bert, was crouching before him, fear shining in his eyes. Brand noted that the arch criminal, lying at that moment trussed up in his own

secret room, must be an unforgiving master indeed.

"I tied him well, sir: I am sure I made no mistake."

"Mistake! How can you have done otherwise? He rose up at me, I say, and now he's gone."

Brand made a movement as if to assault the man standing in front of him. The other shrank back. Brand turned on his heel and moved to the fireplace.

"What is done is done," he said, once more suavely. "Nothing can undo it. All the same, my friend, things are awkward, damned awkward." He paused for a moment. "Still, he hasn't the slightest idea where he is. How long will it take him to reach the village? To reach somewhere whence he can inform the police?"

Bert, evidently much relieved at the change in his master's mood, brightened up visibly.

"Take him a long time, sir. He'll have made straight for the wood. He's practically bound to lose his way there. A good couple of hours or more, I should think. If he's lucky he'll do it in an hour and then they've got to come here."

"Ah! Let's leave a little surprise for them. Let's leave the mutilated body of a girl upon this desk."

Brand spoke in as good an assumption of the Sinister Individual's voice as he could muster at that moment. He dared not risk the man's cold laugh. He knew that that would be difficult, that it would be a work of art in itself to accomplish that merciless tone. But under his breath he laughed to himself, for he suddenly realised that his adventurous spirit was enjoying itself to the utmost.

But the detective was far too great an artist to overdo the part that he was playing. He turned round sharply.

"Bert, prepare for instant flight."

"Yes, sir."

The prospect of action pleased the man.

"Get everything ready. How long will it take you?"

"Not long, sir. Twenty minutes at the outside."

Brand smiled, as cynical a smile as he could muster.

"You need not hurry to that extent. Five minutes before the police arrive will be quite enough for us. We will make our way to the coast. There we will separate and meet again later. I must formulate my plans. When you are ready come back and let me know."

"Yes, sir."

Bert made for the door, but as he reached it he turned. For a few moments he stood still, staring at Brand.

"And then the girl?"

Once more the inspector twisted his lips into the loathsome smile.

"And then," he said, "the girl."

CHAPTER XXV

ALAN made his way as silently as he could down the paved path, through the outhouses and into the wood. He remembered Brand's advice and made a note of his position relative to the moon, which he could just see shining between two clouds; Brand had stressed the importance of speed on his mission, and Alan had no desire to lose himself in the darkness of the trees and thus delay matters. Once in the wood he sacrificed all attempts at silence for speed, and ran as fast as the undergrowth allowed him, keeping always a watchful eye on his direction. The hint that the inspector had given him was useful. He was fairly certain, as he continued in his headlong rush, that he would come out of the wood at the spot which Brand had mentioned.

All the time thoughts chased each other rapidly through his brain. He was still almost dazed by the astonishing surprise which he had received such a very short time before in that room. He was amazed at the perfection of Brand's make-up, astounded beyond measure at the histrionic abilities which the detective possessed, and of which he had before never had the slightest suspicion. He would have sworn that the voice he had heard talking to Bert, his jailer, had been the voice of the Sinister Individual, and a great admiration welled up in his soul

for this intrepid friend who had accomplished such a remarkable exploit in the very fastness of the arch criminal himself.

But these thoughts spurred Alan on to greater haste.

He knew that so far Brand had succeeded in allaying all suspicion, but he knew also that the most difficult part of the inspector's deception was yet to come, was perhaps taking place at that very moment. Brand had obviously chosen the course he had adopted for two reasons: one, the major one obviously, for the release of Jessica, but his policeman's instincts had, no doubt, forced him to attempt the capture not merely of the leader of the gang, but of the whole gang as well, and for this he was taking a great risk, a risk which Alan fully appreciated.

He had trusted in the youth, trusted that he would obtain help with all possible speed, and Alan was resolved that this trust would not be misplaced. He renewed his efforts, increased his pace. His breath was coming in gasps now with the unaccustomed effort, but he kept on, forcing his unwilling limbs to obey the purpose in his brain.

At last the wood seemed to be thinning. Hope welled within him, for if he were really approaching the end of the wood, then the first part of his task was nearly over. Brand had said he would come out onto a road close to the village in which the local police inspector was awaiting just such a summons. Alan's hopes were realised. The trees became more scattered, the undergrowth less dense; and suddenly Alan cleared the wood and found himself standing

by a hedge which separated him from the white metalled surface of a road.

The clouds had cleared away now. The moon was shining fairly brightly and he could see in the distance the outline of houses, obviously the village. For a moment he paused, for a moment only in which to recover a little from his exertions; then scrambling over the hedge he found himself in the road. He stepped off at a quick trot, all that he was capable of at the moment, towards the village. It was a straggling place, houses having apparently been built haphazard on either side of a main road, and Alan had little difficulty as he ran in noting the police station. A blue light shone from a lantern just above the porch. In three strides he was up the steps and banging at the door, which was opened immediately.

"Inspector Walker," gasped Alan.

The policeman who had opened the door took one look at him and Alan thought for a moment that he was about to question him, but the man evidently realised that his strange visitor, clothes bedraggled now because of the wood, face scratched from unseen branches, had business that was urgent.

"This way," he said gruffly, and led him to a door at the far side of the hall. This he opened, and Alan passed through.

A man rose to meet him, dressed in inspector's uniform.

"Inspector Walker?" asked Alan.

"That's me."

"I have got a message," Alan gasped, "from Brand of Scotland Yard."

"Sit down," said Inspector Walker. "Get your breath back."

Alan sat down gratefully, but he did not rest for the moment.

"Get me through to Heston Aërodrome. Important," he managed to say.

Walker did not hesitate. He seized the telephone at his side and asked for the connection. For a moment or two Alan remained silent, recovering from his exertions. He knew that before the connection was made with Andrew and he had given him Brand's message, there was no immediate hurry. Any explanation which he might make to Walker would take only a moment, but he could not leave the station without having summoned what Brand had been pleased to call his reserve line of attack.

He recovered himself sufficiently, however, to speak before the call came through. He turned to Walker and gave him a quick but graphic account of what had happened, then told him of Brand's message and of what was required of Walker and his men. The inspector immediately hastened from the room to issue the necessary instructions. Just as all the men were gathered in the hall outside, a half dozen or so, and Walker had returned to inform Alan of this fact, the telephone bell rang. Alan was now feeling very much better, and moving over to the desk he lifted the receiver.

"Hullo!"

"Hullo!" came the welcome sound of Andrew's voice.

"Is that you, Andrew?"

"My God! It's Alan!"

"Yes. Listen. No time for explanations now. Message from Brand."

"Right!" came Andrew's voice again, tinged with excitement.

"Listen. It's important," went on Alan, earnestly. "You are to ring up Scotland Yard. You are to get the Flying Squad to come down to Green's farm. You know."

"I know," replied Andrew. "At once?"

"At once," repeated Alan. "Brand said as fast as their cars could take them. You are to come down with them if you want to be in at the finish. Those were Brand's words."

"I shall be there, old son."

Andrew's voice held a note of exultation.

"I shall be there. Never fear. Anything more?"

"Nothing more," said Alan, "but you've got that, haven't you?"

"Yes. Scotland Yard Flying Squad to come at once with all possible speed to Green's farm. Is that right?"

"That's right," agreed Alan.

"Splendid! Good luck, old lad."

"Good luck."

Alan hung up the receiver and turned to Walker.

"All ready?" he asked.

"All ready, sir," said Walker. "Have you got a gun, sir?"

"No."

Walker quickly supplied the deficiency.

"Which is the quickest way?" asked Alan, putting the automatic in his pocket.

"Through the wood, sir. The way you came."

"Right," said Alan. "Let's get on with it."

In silence the small party emerged from the police station and set off at a quick trot along the road. It didn't take them long to reach the wood, and Walker here remarked to Alan that as he knew the way he had better lead. Alan acquiesced and fell in behind the inspector. Through the wood they went as fast as the undergrowth permitted. Walker never hesitated an instant, and Alan realised that he must know the wood thoroughly.

A medley of thoughts rushed through Alan's excited brain as they made that return journey through the wood. As they approached ever nearer to the farm he could not help wondering whether Brand had been able to carry to the finish his superb piece of bluff. But as they ran Alan became ever more nervous: he had done his part as fast and as well as he had been able, but had it been fast enough? Was Jessica still safe, Jessica and Brand? Or were they now the latest victims to the fury of that arch criminal in whose power Alan had been so recently? He shuddered and banished the pessimistic thought; but it was with a great sense of relief that at last he was able to see, shining out like a beacon between the trees, the light from the window of the farm.

Here Walker checked the headlong rush. He turned and addressed his men in a whisper.

"All ready?"

A chorus of gruff voices answered him.

"Guns handy and loaded?"

Again there came the united reply.

"Right! Now keep quiet from now on. Not a word to be spoken, no sound to be made. Follow

in single file. Mr. Squire, perhaps you would like to lead."

Alan was grateful to Walker for the suggestion. He stepped into the road and led the determined and silent little band following behind him quickly through the outhouses. They came to the paved path and stepped on the grass growing to the side of it. Here they made no sound as they approached the last few yards to the house. Alan put out his hand as a signal for them to stop, then alone he rapidly crept up to the window and glanced in.

The sinister figure in dark clothing was seated motionless at the desk, his sallow face bent over a paper which he was evidently carefully studying.

Alan laughed to himself. So he was in time. Joyfully he turned to the others and waved them on. Joyfully he opened the door and stepped into the lighted room.

As he entered the man at the desk looked up. He pointed quickly towards the door.

"Down in the cellar, Walker, all of them. Show them the way, Alan. The cellar in which you were kept a prisoner. Then come back to me, Alan."

The man smiled, a smile which lit up his face and did much to dispel the sinister effect of his sallow complexion and his dark clothes.

"I was lucky. I got them all down there, but hurry. God knows how long that luck will last!"

Quick to obey his commands Alan led Walker and his men across the room, through the hall, and down the passage towards the stairs to the cellar. He pointed to the door.

"That's it, Walker," he said. "Good luck."

Then turning, he ran back to the lighted room.

"My God, Brand!" he cried. "This is the greatest effort which has ever been done, I should think! Where's Jessica?"

Slowly the sinister figure at the desk rose to his feet. There was no smile on his face now: a curiously repellent expression took its place and Alan suddenly felt sick at heart, sick with deadly apprehension. For he knew, *knew* that he was looking into the cold, cruel eyes of the Sinister Individual.

"Detective Inspector Brand," came a suave voice, "is not the only man who can act. True, his performance was admirable, in one way, but in one way only. He failed to convince my friend, Bert. Oh, there you are."

The change of tone, the quick glance towards the door behind him, made Alan spring round, but he was too late. He found himself staring into the levelled automatic of the man, Bert. A cynical smile played about the fellow's lips.

"Good evening, Mr. Prodigal," he remarked. "Welcome home."

Alan turned. There was nothing to be done. A feeling of great hopelessness came over him.

"Kindly place that little weapon on this desk before me."

Alan, dazed by the suddenness of this complete reversal of fortunes, walked forward and obeyed the command.

"It may interest you," remarked his tormentor, "to know what has happened to your friend, Detective Inspector Brand."

With a sudden movement he turned, and crossing to the corner of the room where an armchair was situated, he pulled it round suddenly, revealing the huddled, half-naked form of Brand, securely bound and gagged.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT A sign from the Sinister Individual, the man Bert roughly pulled Alan into the chair which he now knew so well, and trussed him up more effectively than ever before. He could speak, for he was not gagged; but he could scarcely move a finger, his arms and feet were so tightly bound. Having completed this task Bert turned his attention to Brand and treated him likewise, imprisoning him in the other chair, and having made him quite secure he removed the gag from his mouth. At the very moment when he completed this task, the door was thrown open and a man appeared.

"All done, sir."

The Sinister Individual threw back his head and laughed; the inhuman, mirthless laugh which Alan dreaded.

"So much for your police!" he cried, a note of devilish triumph in his voice. "So much for your efforts, Detective Inspector Brand, of Scotland Yard. You thought you had me, eh? To be honest with you I must admit that for one moment I felt depressed. But by putting me out of action temporarily you did not destroy the efficiency of my men. Bert knew who you were, Bert know you to be an impostor. Didn't you, Bert?"

He turned to his satellite, who laughed with him.

"I knew all right, sir."

"You came to look for me, my friend. I shall not forget it. You pulled me out of an awkward predicament."

Then suddenly he turned to the messenger before him.

"Did they give trouble?"

"Not much, sir. One man was inclined to argue."

"Oh," said the Sinister Individual, softly, "and did he argue for long?"

"Not long, sir. We threw him to the end of the passage after putting a knife through his heart."

His master chuckled. Then suddenly he turned to Brand.

"Talking of knives," he said slowly, every word quite distinct and clear, "I saw you with my own eyes put a knife, my knife, into my dog. You killed him, Detective Inspector Brand. Killed him in cold blood. You have just heard that one of your men has been killed in a like manner. Tit for tat! I hope you are pleased with your efforts."

Brand did not look in the least abashed.

"Well, mister," he said quietly, "I suppose all's fair in love and war, and this is war of a sort, isn't it?"

The Sinister Individual scowled at him.

"If you choose to call it so," he said.

"I am afraid I am beyond bringing you to justice over this matter," said Brand, equally cheerful. "But still you'll cop it sooner or later, don't you fear."

His captor laughed.

"I like your spirit, Inspector," he said, quietly.

"You would have made a useful member of my little band."

It was Brand's turn to smile.

"Thank you for those kind words," he said, "because all you lads are going to end on the gallows. Frankly I'd sooner be on the side of the hangers."

"In spite of the fact," said the Sinister Individual slowly, "that you are going to end very soon with a knife in your heart?"

"While there's life there's hope," said Brand. "Not much, I agree; but . . . well, it's supposed to be a true saying. Anyway I have got the satisfaction of knowing I have done my job to the best of my ability. So you are going to kill me, are you?"

"I am," came the reply, "with my own hand, just as you killed my dog."

There was a bright gleam in his eye, the gleam of insanity which Alan had noticed before. The man had evidently found some affection in his warped brain, which he had lavished upon this dog. Brand had obviously committed the unforgivable sin by killing it. But Alan had no time in which to consider the matter further. Brand started to speak.

"You are a quaint Johnnie," he said. "We put you down and then you come up again as if nothing had happened. Good effort, that. Would it be too much to ask you how Mr. Green, I believe he likes to be called, found out that I was not your good self?"

Alan looked at Brand in surprise. The man was unusually loquacious; what was more, he was keeping his nerve in the most remarkable manner. But Alan

could not quite understand the purport of Brand's conversation. Interesting no doubt it was to find out where he had failed, but there was so much more on his, Alan's mind—thought of their impending doom, of Jessica almost saved and now lost irretrievably—that he could not find it possible to listen attentively to this strangely impersonal conversation which was being carried on between the two chief figures in the drama now unfolding before him.

"A reasonable question," said the Sinister Individual, in suave tones. "A very reasonable question. No, Inspector, I do not see why the facts should be withheld from you, in view of your most regrettable but nevertheless unavoidable demise within the next hour or so. Mr. Green, as you like to call him . . . personally I find the one word Bert quite adequate—since it is shorter and more friendly . . . well, Mr. Green came in here when you were impersonating me. Your appearance, I must say, was admirable. I watched you making up with my grease paints at my table in my room. I watched you, as I say, from the corner in which you had thrown me, and I was interested. Your knowledge of the art of disguise was quite extraordinary. I didn't know that the police were so efficient. And then when you tried a few sentences on me I was still more astonished, for I realised that your voice was almost identical with my own. All the same, my friend, I never lost hope. I was in a pretty tight corner certainly, on the face of it, but I never lost hope, not for one single instant. And there was a reason for it, Inspector, there was a reason of which you knew nothing."

"So I gathered," said Brand. "Well, thanks very

much for all you said about me. It's just that point, you see, which worries me; I thought I was very good myself. It's just that little reason which I should like to know. If one is very successful one can usually point to something which makes one so, but if by chance one fails, as I have done to-night, it is certainly interesting to know why one has done so. You say you were never discomfited. Well, why? What made you so certain that everything was all right, that you were to be released?"

The Sinister Individual threw back his head and laughed.

"Just that," he said.

"Oh," said Brand. "Sorry I don't follow you."

Again the man laughed.

"Just that," he repeated.

Brand stared at him, a vacant expression on his face. "You will oblige me," he said, "by being a little more explicit, sir. Sorry, but I don't tumble. Have I been very amusing or something?"

"You have," said the Sinister Individual. "Your poor little efforts to deceive me and my men have been very amusing to us all, but that is not why I laughed. The one thing which you could not do was to imitate that laugh, and that was the one thing which my friend, Bert, was waiting for."

"Good God!" cried Brand. "Now I get you. I should have laughed, is that it?"

"Yes, my friend." The Sinister Individual was smiling. "Yes, you thought you were very clever, didn't you? And up to a point I must admit you were. You thought that you had me cold, didn't you? Well, you very nearly had, but you couldn't

imitate that laugh, and I am not surprised. Let me tell you that it took me no less than six months to evolve a laugh which would contain some distinguishing sound not to be heard in any other uttered in the world. It took me some time, a long time to perfect it, but it was essential. I understand that someone has said in the past that by attention to detail real genius is shown: if that is so, then I can claim to genius. I have certainly been very attentive to details: I think I have made arrangements to combat any surprise. It was perfectly possible that someone would come to my house, overpower me and take my place just as you did to-night. It was a possibility which I had to guard against. There is a rule, therefore, which Bert knows very well, and that rule is this. If I give any instructions of an important nature I always laugh. You were surprised, perhaps, that having given your instructions this evening . . . Bert has told me all about it . . . he delayed for some time at the door, waiting . . . making an excuse for conversation before obeying you. Is that so?"

"Frankly," said Brand, "I did not notice it."

"Ah! Well, if you had seen my men jumping to my commands, obeying me implicitly and at once, you would have realised that there was something different in Bert's actions to-night with you—a delay that there should not have been. There you underrated me, Inspector, for I feel you did not realise that I had the power over my men that I have. If I had laughed then, or perhaps I should say, if you had laughed then with my laugh, Bert would have rushed off to obey the commands at once. As it was

he waited. He did not get the guarantee which he waited for. Acting on instructions which I had given him some time ago, he made off immediately for the secret room. There, of course, he found me. You know the rest."

"D'you know," said Brand presently, in a very conversational tone, "it's a funny thing, but I very nearly did laugh, and then I decided that I wouldn't risk it. You see your laugh is peculiar and it would have taken me some time . . ."

"Some time!" struck in the Sinister Individual. "Some time to do that laugh! Why, six months, my friend, six months at the least, and hard work at that."

"Six months, if you like," said Brand, "some time anyway to get it perfect. I could do your voice all right. I had your appearance to perfection, that I know."

"You did," said the Sinister Individual, ungrudgingly.

"And I very nearly risked that laugh. Wonder what would have happened if I had?"

"I will tell you what would have happened," came the reply. "You might have produced a sound which to your ears would have been absolutely the double of the sound of my laugh. To your ears, I repeat, but not to Bert's. He would have recognised a certain modulation of sound as absent, he would have known it was not my laugh. Nothing would have happened except what did happen; so, Inspector, I am glad to be able to tell you that you must have no regrets on that point. If you had decided to take the risk of that laugh Bert would

have done no different, for he would have known. There is a subtle message conveyed in my laugh; no one will notice it except those who are told of the secret, but these will know as surely as if I were present there before them, should any impostor attempt to imitate the sound."

Suddenly his mood changed.

"Come, we must get to business. I have a certain amount to do, arrangements to make. I must be off immediately after dawn to-morrow."

He turned to Alan.

"You, Mr. Squire, must remember that you have a part to play. You are to conduct me to another land to-morrow. You have not forgotten, I trust?"

"I have not forgotten," said Alan dully.

"Just one minute," said Brand. "There is another little thing that is not quite clear. About this alarm of yours. I should awfully like to know how it works. You see——" His voice rambled on, but Alan did not hear him. He was staring at his friend, amazed by the change in the man. All the time he had known him, and by reputation before that, he had believed Detective Inspector Brand of Scotland Yard to be the most terse, gruff person in the world. Yet here was Brand talking for all he was worth, chatting away, using roundabout phrases where a short word would convey his meaning, entirely different to his usual self. What was the meaning of it? Was it possible that in being overpowered his brain had been affected by some blow? Was it possible? . . .

Then in a flash the truth occurred to Alan. His

message to Andrew, his message to the Flying Squad of Scotland Yard! Obviously Brand was out to waste time, all the time that he was able. Obviously Brand was doing his very utmost in as unobtrusive a manner as possible to delay the Sinister Individual's terrible intention of putting Jessica to a horrible death. If sufficient time could be wasted, if he could make the delay long enough, then it would be possible for Andrew and the Flying Squad to reach the farm before the man had accomplished his vile threat . . . before he had completed his collection.

Alan glanced at the sinister figure sitting behind the desk, wondering whether any inkling of danger, of the real truth had come to him. But the man was sitting placidly listening to Brand's verbose conversation, pleasantly courteous, although the gleam in his eyes was always there.

"Inspector," he interrupted suddenly, "the alarm is a neat contrivance, but you know all about it."

"I don't," said Brand. "I know nothing about it. A neat contrivance? I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, yes, you do," came the suave tones in quick reply. "Oh, yes, you do. You have heard of the invisible ray, the ray which once broken, if a person passes between two points, will give an alarm; a burglar alarm in fact." He laughed again loudly. "I have used it. A clever arrangement. A neat idea."

"Good gracious!" Brand laughed heartily. "That, I must say, is an astonishing performance. Fancy using a thing originally intended for the very re-

verse performance, to protect yourself—a criminal! Good Lord! That's a good one." He laughed again. "I must say I do think that's a bright effort."

"Thank you," said the Sinister Individual. "Thank you. There's something on your mind, Inspector, something else, I feel. I wonder what it is? I should rather like to know. I hate not knowing exactly what my guests are thinking of. You are anxious about something, aren't you?"

"Me?" said Brand. "Anxious? Well, I suppose I am a bit. You'd be anxious, too, if you'd been told that you had only an hour or so to live."

"Ah!" said the Sinister Individual. "So that's it, is it? I thought you said that while there's life there's hope?"

"I have been told so," said Brand, "in books and things, but . . . even if one has the comfort of that saying, the fact of your presence here with complete power over me is not very reassuring."

"No," said the Sinister Individual. "No."

Then suddenly he rose to his feet. Evidently he had decided to dismiss the subject from his mind, to get on with the work in hand.

"We have delayed enough," he cried. "Bert, fetch the men. When they are here go down and get the girl."

"Just one moment," began Brand, but relapsed into silence before an imperious gesture on the part of his captor.

"Enough. What latitude I am going to give you I have given you."

Alan, quick to take up his cue, burst into the conversation.

"It's all very well," he said firmly and suddenly. "You have allowed Inspector Brand to put various questions to you and you have answered him, but you haven't given me a chance."

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a grateful glance from Brand. Evidently he had assumed correctly: time was of paramount importance, time in fact was the only thing that could save them.

The Sinister Individual gave a malevolent glance in his direction.

"And what may you have to ask?" he remarked.

"Do I understand aright," said Alan, "that to-morrow morning shortly after dawn you require me to take you over to France in my aircraft?"

"Yes. But the possessive mood with regard to the aëroplane is out of place," remarked the Sinister Individual, suavely. "Still, I will let that pass with the bare remark that the machine, although I understand registered in your name, or whatever you do to aëroplanes, is undoubtedly in my possession at the moment. Yes, you understood me aright. To-morrow morning as soon as it is light enough we set forth for France."

He smiled pleasantly.

"Wouldn't it be just as well," said Alan, "if I had a look over the machine first? There are plenty of little things that can go wrong with a machine. I value my own skin sufficiently to desire that . . . well, that the task should be accomplished, that you should reach France safely to-morrow. I should hate some mechanical breakdown to occur, which could be avoided by a quick overhaul at the moment."

His captor laughed.

"This sudden solicitude for my welfare does you credit, Mr. Squire. I am glad to see that you are so sensible a person, but in point of fact your request is entirely superfluous. The machine has been carefully overhauled by my chauffeur and expert in these matters, as far as the engine is concerned. You need have no worry on that account. As far as the rest of the aëroplane is concerned, well . . . there I must grant you that you and you alone know anything about it. On the other hand, she was all right for flight yesterday evening. She is in exactly the same condition now as she was then. I can only assume, therefore, that she will be in perfect condition for the flight to-morrow."

"But you have had to move her," said Alan, quickly, "from the field. Something may have been touched, some small thing, small perhaps to the minds of those who do not know, but of vital importance, something may have become either damaged or broken."

"There is very little risk of that," said the Sinister Individual quietly, "and in any case I would not mind waiting ten minutes to-morrow morning for you to put it right."

"That's funny," said Brand, shortly.

The Sinister Individual scowled at him.

"What's funny?"

"You said you were always prepared for any eventuality."

"And so I am."

"And yet you leave this rather vital matter, the condition of the aëroplane, to chance."

"Believe me," said the other quietly, "there is no chance about it. The machine has been very carefully handled. She is as fit as ever she was to fly."

"Well," said Alan, racking his brains for something else to say, "well, don't know that I feel very happy about it. It would be awkward if we had to land in the sea."

"Land in the sea!" said Brand. "Can you do that?"

"Silence!"

Their captor had risen to his feet and his command came in a loud voice.

"I have had enough from the pair of you. Perhaps you'll be less inclined for pleasant conversation when you see what is about to happen. I hereby invite you to attend at this most interesting occasion —the final addition to my collection."

As he was speaking the door opened and a file of men entered, as villainous-looking a lot as Alan had ever seen. He recognised one or two of the men as those who had acted as his jailers, but the others he had never seen before. He was surprised at their number. Five or six he would have expected, but there was a good dozen here. At a signal from their chief they lined up on each side of the room.

"Dear, dear, dear," said Brand, quietly. "Alfred Smith, alias Brown, alias Black. You've been wanted for some time, haven't you, Alf? I wondered where you had got to. And old Bob Harvey, wanted for a murder in Birmingham, not to mention Fred Warner. I believe the Welsh police are after you, aren't they, Fred?" He turned to the Sinister Individual with a pleasant smile. "I congratulate you, Mr.

Whatever-Your-Name-Is. I congratulate you heartily. You have certainly collected as bright a lot for a bodyguard as ever I have seen. This is peculiarly interesting to me. I have been looking for some of these fellows for quite a long time. Couldn't make out where on earth they'd disappeared to. I am glad that I know at last."

"No more glad," said his captor, staring at him now keenly, "than they are to see you in your present condition. One of the three whose names you have mentioned will help me put an end to your career, Detective Inspector Brand. I hope you like the prospect."

"Well," said Brand, pleasantly. "It doesn't really matter who does it if it's going to be done, does it? At least not to me."

"I am glad," remarked the Sinister Individual, "that you take it in this manner. Are you a fatalist by any chance, Inspector?"

"More or less," Brand grinned. "One has to be in my profession. Things happen so quickly, just as they have to-night. Not so very long ago I thought I was top-dog here, now I find myself in a very displeasing position. I really don't think——"

"Stop!"

The Sinister Individual looked at him intently.

"What is on your mind, Inspector? What is the matter with you to-night? Has the blow which Bert was forced to give you turned your brain, by any chance? I have always heard that the great Inspector Brand of Scotland Yard was a particularly careful man with his words. Why are you so conversational this evening?"

"Me?" said Brand. "Am I? That's news to me, anyway. I'd no idea. Must be the blow that your friend Bert gave me, I suppose. Was it necessary to hit quite so hard, do you think? He put me out for a long time. I don't feel that it was really quite necessary."

His words tailed off before the glance his captor threw at him, a glance of frozen hatred. Suddenly, after a pause, the man spoke again.

"In a minute or two," he said, "my friend Bert will bring Miss Jessica before me. She knows what is coming to her. I have prepared the corner of the room." He turned to the man by his side. "Turn their chairs quickly."

Unable to prevent the operation, Alan and Brand found themselves whirled round and placed so that they were facing the far corner of the room. Alan looked with apprehension at the spot where he knew Jessica's ordeal was to take place, and he saw fixed to the wall an iron ring about the height of her head.

"You may notice," came the suave voice, and Alan realised that the words were intended for him, "that I have taken some pains to prevent any rapid cessation to the amusement of the evening. It could cease so suddenly, so unnecessarily suddenly, by the girl taking her courage into her hands and rushing for Bert with his knives, or at me. It might be necessary then to shoot her before she had completely undergone her punishment. But with that ring which I have had fixed, there will be no fear of this. I had her carefully measured for it. That ring will be fixed round her throat. She may move

her hands and feet as she desires. That doesn't interest me, but she will be fixed to that wall. She will be unable to move away from it."

"What's going to happen?" asked Brand.

Alan recognised a new note in his voice, a note of apprehension, and with it a feeling of great hopelessness overwhelmed him, for he knew that they had shot their bolt, that they had delayed matters as much as it was humanly possible to do. Alan could not see his watch and there was no clock within sight. He could guess only at the amount of time they had wasted, but he knew, although he tried to make himself believe otherwise, he knew only too well that there could be no hope of rescue by the Flying Squad for some time yet. It all seemed hopeless. Possibly they might save their lives, but Jessica seemed doomed since the Sinister Individual was now quite definitely in no mood to delay any longer. He did not even answer Brand's question, and just at that moment there came an interruption, for the door was thrown open and Jessica, supported by Bert, stood in the doorway.

Alan stared at her and his heart overflowed with admiration and pity. She looked so white and frail, so utterly tired. Her beauty, as contrasted with the vicious-looking men surrounding her, seemed to make her a thing apart, unearthly, ethereal. Despite their weariness her eyes gleamed brightly, while her hair, which had become slightly deranged, fell about her cheeks in tiny curls.

"Bert, kindly place her in position."

The words were spoken in a gloating tone. The

Sinister Individual was evidently enjoying himself hugely.

Bert dragged the half-fainting girl to the corner which had been prepared for her, and flinging open the steel necklace fixed to the wall which was to support her, he pushed her roughly into position and then let the steel spring together. He stood back quickly, surveying his handiwork with a malicious grin.

The touch of steel seemed to make a great difference to Jessica. Suddenly from her state of semi-collapse she seemed to pull herself together, to face her enemies. Perhaps now she realised that there was no further hope, that her end was very near. But Jessica, gallant Jessica, stood very upright before them, holding the monster who was torturing her with her eyes, in which there was no hint of fear or appeal. She looked more than ever desirable, more than ever unattainable to Alan at that moment.

"I am glad I killed that dog," said Brand suddenly, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Alan realised what was in the inspector's mind. He had decided, if possible, to avert the wrath of the madman behind him from the defenceless girl to himself. He thought that by touching on what was evidently a raw spot, he might conceivably not only delay matters further but so anger his captor that he would direct his fury against him rather than against the girl. Alan could not help hoping that the scheme, in spite of all that it involved, would be successful, but he was doomed to almost instant disappointment. The Sinister Individual paid no heed whatsoever to the remark. Instead he looked

steadfastly at the girl in the corner. Evidently in his warped brain the thought of adding to that terrible collection within those four walls not so far away was even more important than the thought of the beast he had loved, now lying mutilated in that secret room.

Suddenly he began to speak, and instantly there was silence around him. There was something new, something impressive in the low tones of his voice, frightening almost, for it was very evident now that in sight of the completion of his collection, in full view of his quarry, the man was no longer human. He had become a beast, a fiend incarnate, had lost every trace of human nature, and was now a *thing* of danger and menace.

"Miss Jessica,"—the words came low but every man in that room could hear, so distinct and deliberate was the voice—"Miss Jessica, you have done your best to thwart me at every turn. You entered into this conflict of your own free will, with no reasonable urge, no real justification. There was no need for you to oppose me, but you chose to go against me, and I must admit that you have been fairly successful. You have not succeeded in preventing my activities, but you have undoubtedly brought the chase upon me at last. Thanks to you I feel that I received the visit of Detective Inspector Brand last night. It is to you that I owe the presence of the inspector here this evening. I cannot deny that I have had a fair share of luck in my activities, but that luck has been helped out by the fact that I played my hand well. It cannot go on for ever, that

I know. The best-played hand cannot last for ever. To-morrow I leave, with my collection completed up to the number of thirty. There are only twenty-nine in there"—he nodded his head towards the cemetery—"but to-night, in a few minutes, perhaps a little more, perhaps a little less, there will be thirty. As I have told you before, you are to be the thirtieth."

He paused, but no one made a sound. His own men, even, clustered around, seemed fascinated by his words.

"If you had not chosen, Miss Jessica, to be so very stupid and to come in of your own free will against me, you might not now have been destined as the thirtieth of my collection. On the other hand, had you been unlucky enough to attract the attention of any of my men and formed one part of it, well then your death, at any rate, would have been fairly painless. But you have chosen to attempt to thwart me, and that is unforgivable. For that reason and for that reason alone I have arranged a little spectacle to-night in which you and my friend Bert here will play the leading parts. We had a rehearsal last night. You know precisely what I mean. Have you anything to say before the entertainment starts?"

Very quietly, but very distinctly so that every word could be heard by the people waiting, anxiously, eagerly for her reply, the girl spoke.

"Very little," she said. "You killed my cousin. You have brought misery to those I love most in all the world. That was my reason."

The Sinister Individual threw back his head and

laughed. He ceased abruptly and looked at her again.

"And have you nothing else to say?" he asked. "Be quick. Time is getting short."

"Only this," said the girl. "If I had my choice again, again would I come in against you."

She stood there defiantly, her breath coming quickly, a high colour in her cheeks. Alan closed his eyes. He could not bear to see her in such frightful circumstances, she whom he so longed to protect from the smallest indignity, the merest suspicion of insult. That she should be tortured thus, exposed to every suffering which this fiend could devise, her death to supply an entertainment, her agony an amusement, racked his soul. The strain was awful; Alan felt he was going mad.

"Bert, you may commence."

The Sinister Individual sat down once more behind his desk and folded his arms in front of him, for all the world as though he were seating himself in the front row of the stalls at some theatre.

Bert, in the meantime, had laid out his knives carefully on a small table in front of him. He looked at them and selected one.

"Where first, chief?"

"As you will, Bert." The words came in a silken tone. "As you will, but remember *not too soon.*"

Alan opened his eyes again. Just as on the evening before, something prevented him from shutting out the terrible scene now taking place.

And then there came an amazing interruption. Brand suddenly threw back his head and uttered a volley of imprecations against his captor and his

gang, particularly denouncing Bert, and made so much noise, in fact, that Bert hesitated, looking at him. For a moment Alan thought that the strain, bearing upon the blow of which Brand had spoken, and which he had received earlier in the evening, had been too much for him, and that his brain had turned. But in the middle of an outburst of oaths and curses, he noticed Brand's left eye quickly close and open again, and realised he had been favoured with a private wink and that the whole affair was a pretence. His heart went out to the gallant inspector still striving his utmost to save the desperate girl, ready to sacrifice himself rather than see her tortured before his eyes.

"Does he put you off, Bert?" asked the Sinister Individual, his voice carrying above the ravings of the apparently demented detective.

But the man did not wait for an answer. He turned and signed to one of the men beside him. In an instant a figure stepped forward and quickly placed a gag into Brand's mouth. The ravings ceased in a guttural sound and finally stopped altogether.

"Dear, dear," said the Sinister Individual with a smile to Alan. "I thought the fellow's nerves were better than that. I am sorry; I had always been told so much, so much that was complimentary about Detective Inspector Brand. I am sorry this great man should be so disappointing in time of stress. Well, Bert, are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see now, somewhere painful, but somewhere that will not kill. What about pinioning one arm to the wall? The right arm, shall we say?"

Alan realised that any further interruption must come from him, but when he tried to shout, to rave as he had seen Brand do, no sound would come from his throat. He was parched with horror; he could but sit motionless, knowing that he was failing the girl he loved, sit there and watch her agony. There was no possible hope now: the second line of attack could not arrive for at least another hour.

A movement on the part of Bert made him turn and watch him. The fellow had picked up a knife, had placed it carefully in his right hand, had drawn that hand back ready to throw. He poised himself for an instant; then his hand started to go forward, and as it did so there came a crash of glass.

For a moment Alan did not understand what had happened, but then he saw that the aim of the thrower had been diverted. The knife hit the wall some distance from Jessica and remained sticking there quivering.

And then to the dazed Alan came the true reason for this extraordinary failure.

The report of an automatic came through the window and at the same moment Bert collapsed to the ground, a trickle of blood proceeding from his mouth.

Almost simultaneously a second report crashed out in the night air, and the Sinister Individual, who had half-risen from his desk, fell forward over it, a crumpled figure.

Many shots rang out, many flashes came from the darkness outside. . . .

CHAPTER XXVII

MINE host quickly cleared away the crockery from the table in his private parlour and beamed upon the three men seated there.

"Coffee, sir?"

"Yes," said Brand, "and a spot."

"Quite, sir. What of?"

"Seems to me," said Andrew, "that a Kimbler apiece would just about fit the bill."

"A Kimbler?" Alan looked at him in surprise. "What on earth's a Kimbler?"

"Tumbler of Kimmel," remarked Andrew, shortly.

Mine host giggled and departed on his errand. He brought the liqueurs in a remarkably short space of time and then stood hesitating at the door.

Brand noticed him.

"Well? Anything you want?"

"I thought I'd just like to tell you, gentlemen, that my wife has been into the young lady's room. She thought you might like to know that the young lady is fast asleep, breathing peacefully, sirs."

"Ah!" An exclamation of relief came involuntarily from Alan.

"Thank you," said Brand, with a smile to the genial and good-natured innkeeper. "Thank you

very much. Don't go too far away, mine host. We may want a repeat of this before the night's out. We're celebrating. And see that the chauffeur johnny—Miss Jessica's chauffeur—gets a spot of whatever he wants."

"Yes, sir. Quite, sir."

The little man, with a broad smile, shut the door behind him. For a few moments the three men looked at each other in silence.

"What I don't understand," suddenly said Brand, "is how you got in without working the alarm."

Andrew laughed.

"I took a risk," he said. "Wasn't much of a risk really; I had a hunch last night when we visited . . . what do you call him, Mr. Green? . . . that I might be coming down here again at night in a hurry. Don't know what made me think of it; perhaps it's just an absurd idea I've got of looking for likely landing places wherever I go. Anyway that field at the side of the house struck me as being possible. I remembered it when I was flying down from Heston to-night, and so I landed within the alarm line."

"That, of course," said Alan quietly, "is perfectly brilliant. I don't know whether you realise it, Brand, but the field he is referring to even I, with my small knowledge and experience of flying, know would make a forced landing difficult even in day-time. How he managed to get down in the pitch darkness God only knows."

"Luck," said Andrew, quickly. "I must say that I think they are going to be annoyed with me to-

morrow. I crashed the machine into the hedge. Wonder you didn't hear it."

"It is odd," said Brand, "we never even heard the sound of your engine."

"That's not surprising," replied Andrew. "I shut the engine off at a thousand feet, some way away from you. Came down as silently as I could. You see I didn't know quite what to expect."

"You arrived only in the nick of time, my friend," said Brand. "We delayed it as much as we could, but things had got beyond us. I must say I felt absolutely hopeless. Scotland Yard could not get the Squad down, I knew perfectly well, for another hour at least. If you hadn't taken it into your head to fly instead of coming with them, you wouldn't have been in time. I wonder where I would have been at this moment? Heaven, I think. Can't claim to be perfect, but I don't think I'm bad enough for hell."

He laughed; then suddenly turned very seriously to Andrew.

"Captain," he said, "words fail me and all that, but I'd like you to put it there."

He held out his hand. Andrew, rather sheepishly, grasped it.

"How did you make all that noise?" suddenly asked Brand.

"All that noise?"

"Yes, so many shots coming from all over the place. Thank God you hit the two principals straight off, but you fairly put the wind up the rest of them. I never knew men could scatter so quickly. Lucky

they did, for when you got in and released me my one thought was for the policemen in the cellar. I knew that once they were freed we were safe, thank God."

"Oh," said Andrew, with a laugh, "your automatic seemed to hold quite a lot of cartridges. I pulled off as many as I could and rushed around the place to give the appearance of a lot of men."

Brand laughed heartily.

"I must say at the time," he said, "I got quite nervous. I almost cursed you for not taking more careful aim. One bullet thoroughly scared me; it whizzed past my head not more than six inches away, I'll swear."

"Sorry," said Andrew, with a smile. "I must say I was rather excited at the time. Didn't take very careful aim."

"I'll forgive you," replied Brand, grinning.

Alan suddenly interposed.

"Do you think you will pick up those men, Inspector?"

"I don't care if I don't," said Brand, with a smile. "The two chief criminals are dead anyway, and that saves a lot of trouble for us; finding proofs for their conviction and all the rest of it. The others will probably turn up. They are all well known. They will find it difficult to hide themselves. I recognised three of them straight off when I saw their ugly mugs. Talking of mugs," he looked round inquiringly and then raised his voice: "Mine host!"

The man reappeared almost at once.

"Repeat," said Brand, shortly.

The drinks were brought. For a moment the three friends remained in silence; then Alan began awkwardly.

"Of course," he said, looking at Brand, "you are a blinking marvel, that's what you are. I wish I could find words . . ."

"Don't," said Brand. "Waste of trouble. I know all that." He grinned. "Conceited, aren't I?" He paused for a moment and then looked up rather seriously at Alan. "There's only one little thing that troubles me now," he said. "What am I to do about Miss Jessica? Do I arrest her or do I not?"

Very quietly Alan told the inspector the tale Jessica had unfolded to him just before their capture. Very intently Brand listened; then as Alan concluded he smiled.

"Thank God," he said. "That lets her out all right. She was coming to me anyway. Well, gentlemen," he looked around at his two companions, "about bed-time, don't you think? We've had rather a hectic day. Must say I wouldn't mind the feel of the sheets. To-morrow we shall all go back to London to resume our normal duties. Be a bit dull, won't it?"

"It will," said Andrew, with feeling.

"How are you going up?" asked Alan.

"Don't know," said Andrew. "Depends a great deal on what that machine looks like in the morning."

"I'm afraid," said Alan, rather awkwardly, "that I shan't have room for you in Araminta. Er . . . you see, I had a talk with Jessica before she went to

bed. She rather wants to fly back. I thought it would be a good idea. Fresh air and all that sort of thing."

"Fresh your grandmother," said Brand, shortly. "Congrats, old man!"

THE END